

Knowledge, Skills and Pathways in Further Education

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The industrial heritage of Scotland is long, proudly upheld and (at the time of writing) becoming increasingly important in these times of enhanced political uncertainty, both nationally and internationally. Over the last century, further education (FE) has played a consistent and important role in both supporting and shaping the industrial and economic landscape of Scotland. You need look no further than the names of some of the colleges that existed pre-regionalisation (which I will return to shortly), Stevenson, Telford, Adam Smith, James Watt and Carnegie to name a few, to get a flavour of the historical connections with commerce and industry and its captains. As the post-1970s and 80s decline in manufacturing, heavy engineering (more recently), offshore oil production and mining has taken its toll on the social and economic prosperity of the industrialised belt of Scotland and the north-eastern coast, the fortunes of many FE colleges have also changed. The FE sector in Scotland today is a much changed arena to that of thirty years ago, in fact, to that of five years ago, and is still very much in a state of continuous flux. This chapter explores the current situation with regards to knowledge, skills and pathways within the changing FE sector in Scotland today. These headings are used to scrutinise policy and practice in relation to both students and the professional community working within the sector. Specific attention is drawn to the socio-economic drivers emanating from policy and the purpose and perceived values of FE and the related tensions therein. The amorphous nature of the sector is unpicked in some detail with the aim of understanding the effect of the proliferation of the dichotomy of vocational and academic knowledges underpinning the commentary on the impacts of sector reform and the experiences of students. The chapter goes on to explore the values and purpose of FE in Scotland and the recent pressures brought about through restructure, changing legal and corporate identity, and the many faces that this diverse and heterogeneous sector wears.

THE CHANGING FACE OF FURTHER EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND

Further education is often characterised as being the vocational sector, in fact beyond the shores of the United Kingdom, vocational education and training (VET) is frequently the title it carries. Although holding true for a significant part of the curriculum offered in many colleges, it is not a description that covers the full scope of provision of FE in the

UK and, specifically, Scotland. A significant proportion of courses offered across all aspects of FE are not focused on the vocational acquisition of a practical skill set but are academically focused. (I will come back to this problematic dichotomy in more detail later in this chapter.) In describing FE as a sector, we are also frequently guilty of assuming that FE means colleges of further education. However, once again this is an insufficient description or definition as it fails to take into account the many private training, community education, third sector and charitable providers of education and private business offerings that also fall under the banner. FE is a complex, multifaceted, often disparate grouping of provisions that finds itself described as a sector, where in reality it is perhaps better thought of as a group of smaller sectors filling the gaps in educational provision across society; FE does not simply fill the gap between school and university. The diversity of the sector is no more evident than within colleges themselves which act as a microcosm of learning, covering an enormously diverse curriculum. This in itself can be problematic for leadership and management as policy is frequently devised and implemented in something of a blanket fashion and consequently frequently fails to tailor to the specifics and nuances of the differing subject areas and specialisms.

The amorphous cohesion constructed by policy and described as FE, suffers (understandably) from both an identity crisis and a crisis of prestige. It is repeatedly described in terms that fail to take into account every aspect of the provision under its very large umbrella and, as such, its perceived association with only providing vocational learning has given it a reputation as a second choice or lower standard offering. Subsequent governments across the whole of the UK have struggled repeatedly to fully capture FE's purpose, place, value, remit and scope, leading to a period of benign neglect that has only in the last few years begun to be addressed, albeit rather contentiously. There can be little surprise at this outcome as much of the policy and funding reform has been aimed at the college provision, while the rest of the 'sector' has not gone untouched by repeated and constant reform. Where the economy has been through boom and (dramatically) bust, training provision for trades, industry and commerce has seen similar meteoric peaks and troughs in numbers, engagement and uptake. The knock-on effect to funding, student numbers and sector-specific skills has been dramatic.

The introductory paragraphs to this chapter purposefully paint a picture of a sector beset with challenges in order to highlight the shifting context and complex background in which its successes are still evident, many and growing. FE is the sector that supports a broad scope of industry, promotes equity in and access to adult education, whilst offering a haven for second chance learning and creative industries. There are few areas of our lives where FE graduates are not playing vital roles (construction, retail, childcare, industry, transport, public health – the list goes on). It is important to acknowledge early on in this discussion that the current situation in Scottish FE is challenging but, nevertheless, FE is now attracting the significant attention of local and national government, policymakers and the broader educational community in an intensity not seen in over twenty-five years, much of which will form the basis of the ongoing discussions and analysis in the coming pages.

In a previous edition of this book, Canning (2013) opens by highlighting the tensions and related debate associated with the differences between vocational and academic types of knowledge. In his detailed epistemological analysis, Canning highlights the historical and deep-rooted tendency of scholars to elevate liberal knowledge and denigrate the vocational. As highlighted by Fisher and Simmons (2012), the culturally deep-seated and institutional divisions leading to the imbalance in parity of esteem between vocational and

academically associated routes to learning has never been effectively addressed. This is in part down to the cultural heritage of the UK and the national drive for attainment at higher education level, but also in part to the vocational sector itself. The dichotomy between academic and vocational knowledge is essentially false, as any engineer, chef or health care professional (to name a few) will attest to. You cannot effectively practice in a skilled profession without a comprehensive skills base *and* an accompanying thorough understanding of the underpinning theories that give depth and transferability. However, the increasing focus on a competitive globalised economy and commodification of education (for profit) has seen the stripping away of some of the previously present academic or (theoretical) knowledge and supplanting it with performative assessment-focused, modular learning with skills-based, narrow quantifiable outcomes (Wheelahan, 2010). Crucially, underpinning theoretical ideas that broaden understanding beyond motor reproduction have been given reduced space in many curricula and are frequently taught separately (where at all) and given clear delineation in provision. The divide between academic knowledge and vocational knowledge is not just evident between the higher education and further education sectors, but very much present within the FE sector itself, enacted through practices partially due to both stringent funding reform and an emphasis on quantifiable accountability strategies.

The theoretical underpinnings in academic practice that support the development of acquired and practiced skills are arguably one of the defining factors when considering the development and deployment of tacit artisan skills. The combination of skills mastery and theoretical understanding allows for predictive, diagnostic and analytical use of 'vocational' abilities, and it is this combination upon which much of our economy, social practice, health care and leisure industries are based. There is a problem however: employers now increasingly identify that FE graduates from both full-time and apprenticeship courses are not 'work ready' and require further extensive on the job training. As highlighted by Education Scotland (2016), very few colleges have dedicated strategies for developing employability in students. Lacking in transferable and core essential skills (literacy, numeracy and IT as examples), graduates of vocational routes in both schools and colleges are showing signs of falling victim to the narrowing of curriculum and specific outcomes-based assessment regimes. This, within the Scottish context (and indeed the wider UK), has now drawn significant attention from government policymakers to further and vocational education, the like of which has not been seen since the early 1990s and, consequently, the process of reform has begun in earnest. I will return to this in further discussion regarding pathways and skills within FE but the analysis would be incomplete and lacking in context without first discussing the significant changes made to the governance and structure of the FE sector in Scotland between 2010 and 2017.

REGIONALISATION AND GOVERNANCE

In 2011, the Scottish Government published *Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering Our Ambitions for Post-16 Education* (Scottish Government, 2011). The review outlines the Scottish Government's position (at the time) as being focused on the economic growth and prosperity of Scotland. The post-16 education sector was to be restructured, funded and managed with this as a primary purpose and objective. Although this review covered (in part) both universities and colleges of further education, the strongest effects of this document and its related recommendations would have a greater impact on FE. Subsequent

reviews would act on these recommendations and several significant changes in the form of regionalisation would go on to dramatically shape FE in the following five years. Taking a focus on jobs and economic growth meant that the government were now in a position to ensure that the training provisions for industry and the wider economy were in place, that access to courses was equitable, standards measurable and colleges accountable. Interestingly, an implicating factor in shaping significant changes imposed on the FE sector was the economic crash of 2008 and subsequent austerity measures across funding for all public sectors. The government at the time was quick to announce that spending on compulsory education was protected and ring-fenced; however, this did not apply to the FE sector.

2012 saw the submission and publication of the *Report of the Review of Further Education Governance in Scotland* (Griggs, 2012). Known colloquially as the Griggs report, after its author, the enacted recommendations contained within would prove to be the most far reaching and significant changes to the FE system in Scotland since the passing of the Further and Higher Education Act (Scottish Government, 1992; Government UK, 1992) and known as incorporation, which took place in 1992. The 1992 Act brought about several significant changes to funding regimes and the governance of the FE sector, effectively giving colleges their independence from government control. The initial findings of the 2012 Griggs review were concerned primarily with the structure of the FE sector, its governance and funding. Although issues of equality and innovation are cited as being of primary importance and the driving factors behind the review, it is telling that in the summary outlining the most pressing problems to be addressed (as seen by Griggs) within the FE sector, the review focused on issues of funding, outlining that colleges were not sustainable in their current form. Whilst the subsequent regionalisation agenda was enacted in 2013 under the auspices of equitable access and continuity of provision, the coinciding cuts to funding – 18 per cent between 2011 and 2014 (Audit Scotland, 2015) – were a significant factor in the reduction in both provision and teaching staff as the curriculum was rationalised and refocused on younger learners in full-time courses. Between 2011 and 2014 part-time course places were reduced by 43 per cent, funding for short courses (ten hours or fewer) was removed completely, and teaching staff within the sector were reduced by 9.3 per cent (full-time equivalent), mainly achieved through voluntary severance schemes (Audit Scotland, 2015). Some of these schemes, shortly after completion, came under significant scrutiny for reported, and subsequently investigated, irregularities with some payments to senior staff being reclaimed. These problematic redundancies and related rationalisations of staff and provision across the sector had far-reaching implications and prompted the Education Secretary at that time (Angela Constance) to put together a task group to investigate and report on practice. The resulting report carried with it specific recommendations for good governance and practice across the FE sector in Scotland and represent a significant recognition by the Scottish Government that problems with mergers had been encountered (Scottish Government, 2016a).

In practical terms, several of the forty-two existing colleges were merged to form a mixture of twenty-six unaffected existing colleges and several new larger organisations operating within thirteen regions (see Table 72.1). The rationale for the regionalisation was multifaceted but in essence was promoted as a way of ensuring a strategic regional curriculum focused on the needs of the wider community (including business, infrastructure and industry). The regionalisation process also aimed to rationalise the provision by promoting the creation of centres of excellence where resource in a region could be focused into one

Table 72.1 Post-regionalisation colleges of further education

	Region	College
Single college regions	Dumfries and Galloway	Dumfries & Galloway College
	Scottish Borders	Borders College
	Forth Valley	Forth Valley College
	West Lothian	West Lothian College
	Ayrshire	Ayrshire College
	Edinburgh & Lothians	Edinburgh College
	West	West College Scotland
	Fife	Fife College
Multi-college regions	Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire	North East Scotland College
	Tayside	Dundee and Angus College
	Glasgow	Glasgow Kelvin College
		Glasgow Clyde College
		City of Glasgow College
		New College Lanarkshire
	Lanarkshire	South Lanarkshire College
		Grouped as University of Highlands and Islands (UHI)*
	Highlands and Islands	Perth College
		Lewis Castle College
		Orkney College
		Shetland College
		Inverness College
		Moray College
		North Highland College
		Argyll College
		Sabhal Mòr Ostaig
		West Highland College Highland
		Theological College NAFC Marine Centre
		Scottish Association Marine Science

*Although granted university status in 2011, the UHI is the umbrella organisation for the multiple colleges operating within the Highlands and Islands region

hub providing a higher quality of provision as opposed to several smaller providers offering a dispersed curriculum across several centres.

The opportunities of regionalisation were interesting in that they reportedly offered increased access to a higher quality provision in bespoke locations with direct links to industry, offering a broader basis for work-based/influenced support for learning. However, much of this rationalisation is still ongoing and several of the new colleges are still in the process of building new bespoke premises to house newly formed centres of excellence. The merger process was not without its issues as several organisations reported problems with rationalisation of management structures, estates, curriculum and support functions and associated staff (Scottish Funding Council, 2016). Indeed, both during and since the merger process, there have been several rounds of industrial action staged by both academic and support staff who have been separately trying to negotiate and secure nationally agreed terms and conditions. Although several local disputes have been resolved, national

bargaining and protection of jobs are still issues that may well lead to further withdrawals of labour. This has also impacted students who have faced challenges such as, in many instances, the removal of access to localised provision and increased distance to travel to rationalised curriculum offerings. These issues are outstanding and have yet to be fully addressed in many of the newly formed regions and related colleges (Scottish Funding Council, 2016).

Although merger and restructure have been an outcome of the review carried out by Griggs (2012), one of the main instigating factors of the merger process was the changes to governance recommended by Griggs within the subsequent report of findings following the review (see Scottish Parliament, 2013). A centralising of governance practice and homogenisation of process was to be introduced which would be overseen by ministerial appointments of regional chairs for regional boards of governance. Instead of each institution having a separate board, a regional board would be introduced to oversee all colleges within the designated geographical regions. In a further change to practice, the appointed regional chairs would also receive pay in remuneration for their time, a significant change in policy. In practice this has not been without its issues, as college chief operating officers (principals) are now answerable to a paid regional chair appointed directly by the Minister for Education. This has set up an unusual power dynamic at the senior level of leadership within colleges, as principals are not only answerable to the board but also directly to the Minister of Education via the remunerated and directly appointed regional chair. The system has yet to have had sufficient time in operation to determine fully the potential implications, but it is of interest and noteworthy when considering the source and basis for decision making and leadership vision in the newly formed large regions and related colleges in Scotland.

Given that Scottish FE is undertaking to implement all of these changes across the country, the implications and impact on students should be central to the ongoing debate. Having discussed the implications of the regionalisation agenda on the structure and governance of the sector, it is important to now review the policy revisions introduced regarding the knowledge, skills and pathways of the students accessing the sector.

SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE AND PATHWAYS

In his chairperson's report, introducing a personal perspective, Sir Ian Wood (Scottish Government, 2014), citing the labour force survey of 2014, draws attention to the problem of post-2008 youth unemployment in Scotland. At 18.8 per cent, Wood points out that nearly one fifth of youth in 2014 awoke each morning and wondered if their country needed them. Beyond the hyperbole, Wood raises an important and stark statistic which is deftly set against an image of a country failing to fully support its young people, including those who don't go straight to university from school (according to the cited data, 50 per cent). Given the previous discussion, related to parity of esteem of vocational learning with academic attainment, Wood's observations are both laudable and to be welcomed as they draw attention to the FE sector that, as previously highlighted, has suffered two decades of declining attention and interest from government. As such, significant tension exists within the opening of the report, entitled *Education Working for All*, in that it draws a direct link between FE and its (assumed) sole purpose in promoting employability through vocational pathways and learning. There is no mention of the purpose or role of FE (or indeed education) beyond economic prosperity and in supporting personal development for reasons other than employment. For the moment, this will be accepted and explored as there are

many courses and students in FE who *are* engaged with developing the required skills to secure or continue in employment. However, as the discussion moves towards tackling the purpose of FE and equitable access, these issues will be addressed.

As highlighted in the introductory paragraph of this chapter, FE has a long-standing tradition of supporting transitions from school into employment through the provision of courses validated by industry itself. It was recognised a number of years ago that, along with colleges offering vocational-based routes to employment, schools also had a significant role to play. School/college partnership agreements are highly individual to local authority, college and sponsoring employers and, as such, are difficult to discuss in individual detail; however, the core purpose is to introduce young people to the specific skills and knowledge related to a particular trade or role. The benefits of such school/college partnerships were reviewed in 2008 in a report commissioned by Education Scotland and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE), *Expanding Opportunities* (Scottish Government, 2008). The report highlighted strengths in engagement of disaffected learners, expanding curriculum, increased confidence and successes in attainment, particularly in practical sessions. The report also highlighted areas requiring improvement and chose as an initial point to raise the issue of good results being achieved in practical lessons but a lack of engagement in theory classes. As raised earlier in this chapter, this is a persistent and ongoing issue related to the false dichotomy created that differentiates knowledges related to practical application and to theoretical understanding. It is surely a more difficult task to deliver a practical lesson devoid of theoretical underpinning knowledge than to provide a rich background of knowledge supporting the practical application of skills development? In the writer's experience, and as a lecturer of mechanical and automotive engineering in the FE sector for several years, I struggled with this for a large part of my career. I frequently found removing this false dichotomy to be highly productive. Teaching theory in the automotive workshops of several colleges, I dispensed with over 50 per cent of classroom-based 'theory' and concentrated on enriching practical classes with theory-based discussions. Where better to teach how an engine works than in a workshop with engines?

The *Expanding Opportunities* (Scottish Government, 2008) report does, however, highlight an important point about diversification of choices for young people and the need to remove prejudice against vocational routes. Signalling that a vocational route is a viable and acceptable option for those in the latter years of compulsory education offers broader choices to those who might not have the desire to attend university. Whether attendance leads to a full-time place or the opportunity to secure an apprenticeship (a task broadly accorded insufficient credit for its difficulty) or leads to another avenue entirely, the diversified curriculum and exposure to an adult learning environment in itself could possibly go some way to preparing individuals for self-directed practice, whether in work or education. The choices faced by many people wishing to enrol on a course in FE in Scotland are influenced by many factors. FE provides much more than just vocational skills training. Although individual colleges often have either specialist focus or areas of expertise, most (if not all) offer a curriculum that goes beyond the vocational. The purpose of the FE sector is debated and contentious (largely due to its diversity) but certainly goes some way beyond just providing training for economic engagement and preparation for work. Until recently, it was possible to attend FE colleges in Scotland and enrol in one of several different models of course. Full-time, part-time, day release, evening, community, short, endorsed and recognised or hobby (to identify a few) courses graced the pages of the bulging prospectus of each college. This cuts to the heart of the purpose of FE: community learning and repeated

opportunities to engage with a course or line of interest. Sadly, the budget cuts to FE in Scotland (as detailed previously) have disproportionately affected part-time study and those courses not leading to a qualification or certificate, such as hobby courses and community education programmes. Access to part-time learning opportunities has nationally almost been halved (since 2012) and, as a consequence, those most affected are frequently now not able to attend college as full-time study is not possible due to the requirement to support families and earn a living (single parents, those rehabilitating, and low income families, to name but a few). As part-time courses are withdrawn, the opportunities for those most disadvantaged or those requiring the greatest support are reduced as the focus of FE is forced by funding regimes to narrow and concentrate on courses that lead to employment, or, certainly, the increased chance of securing it. This is incongruous with the traditional model of FE that was seen very much as a hub of community learning provision where access to education was not dependent on the expressed desire to improve your income earning potential. Desires to learn could easily also be focused on personal interest, community work, rehabilitative and supportive activity, or social engagement. The desires within communities are still there but the colleges are increasingly less able to support this sort of provision as the funding does not allow for it. Apprenticeships as a mean to earn while learning (albeit as low as £3.40 an hour for some indentured trainees receiving the minimum wage for apprentices) are scarce and increasingly hard fought as access to and choice of part-time study continues to fall.

The progressive developments that have been made in the provision of FE are to be found in the transitional boundaries between sectors, or, more accurately, the increasingly blurred boundaries. In discussing school/college partnerships it was possible to review the benefits to schools and school pupils in attending FE colleges for part of their study; similar benefits can be found for FE students wishing to progress to university. The word progress in the last sentence is perhaps misleading and a hangover from the belief that university offers a superior learning experience to FE colleges; the courses, focus and pedagogies are unique and frequently tailored to different ends. Transitions between FE and higher education (HE) are changing as increasing numbers of degree courses are taught in partnership between collaborating organisations. 2+2 (two years in college and two years in university) degrees are increasingly provided to capture the required vocational expertise of the staff in FE and the research-focused teaching of partners in HE. This is not seen as progressing from FE to HE as it is one qualification taught and provided in partnership. Where previously it was frequently considered that HE partnerships with FE colleges were in a supportive role from the university, increasingly the vocational expertise within colleges is seen as critical for the teaching of a valuable industry-focused degree and the support is bilateral (Husband and Jeffrey, 2016).

FUTURE PATHWAYS AND THE CONTINUED DEVELOPMENT OF FURTHER EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND

In the context of Scottish, British and international political landscapes, we are standing on the cusp of potentially the most significant changes to national governance and political philosophy since the mid-1940s. Writing this in early 2017 and looking back to a year ago, it was then difficult to conceive of the UK leaving the European Union and the forty-fifth President of the United States of America being Donald Trump. However, in this newly dubbed 'post-truth' era, the deep and far-reaching impacts of the 2008 financial crisis,

increasing conflict in the Middle East and related refugee crisis, and the accelerating globalisation of the knowledge economy have all filtered through into popular politics. Poised on the threshold of a new era of international political wrangling in which, for many millions of displaced people, the future is at best uncertain, new alliances are being forged, national and devolved governments are trying to legislate, and skills requirements are being assessed. The Scottish Government is not alone in its efforts to design and impose reform on FE but is amongst the most proactive in its approaches.

The UK-wide apprenticeship levy comes into force in the spring of 2017 which will see larger companies (those with an annual pay bill of over £3 million) having to pay into a national fund for the support of apprenticeships. The levy will be set at 0.5 per cent of total pay bill with an initial allowance of £15,000 deducted. As an example, a £5 million pay bill would mean a levy of £25,000, and when the £15,000 allowance is deducted the final sum owed would be £10,000. The levy is an example of national policy set in Westminster that has an impact on the devolved education of Scotland. The levy will still be paid in Scotland but will go to the Scottish Government for use in supporting Scottish apprenticeship placements (it will replace existing funding, and not add to it). In response, the Scottish Government has promised to increase the number of apprenticeship places annually, by 2020, to 30,000 (Scottish Government, 2016b). It remains to be seen if these changes will have an impact on the availability and quality of apprenticeships but it certainly demonstrates a national willingness to address the importance of cross-sector skills training.

Thomas and Gunson, (2017), in a research project drawing on qualitative data collected in Scotland, draw attention to several critical factors (as they see them) for skills development and FE over the coming years. These factors include embedding an outcome approach and setting a clear national purpose of the skills system, regional integration of the skills system, clarifying roles of learning routes within the skills system, learners and employers co-designing a responsive skills system, improving flexibility of learning, and increasing transferability of learning. These points, although some possibly contentious, again draw attention to the importance of the role of FE in shaping the national response to the dynamic needs of the national economy. Given the current opportunities for schools, colleges and universities to take on these identified points, it is possible to see how a parity of esteem in provision can be achieved through integrated working and partnerships. Indeed, substantial work would be needed to clarify exactly how these points would or could be implemented, but they certainly offer some substance and a starting point to continue to develop collaboration with all sectors of Scottish education.

However, and as promised, I must return to the point raised earlier about the role of FE in Scotland beyond the part it has in supporting industry and the economy. In Husband (2016) I claimed that if we do not (as a nation) start to publicly support FE, colleges would start to disappear. I was criticised for engaging in hyperbole, a point I am willing (in part) to concede but also offer no apology for. The continued cuts to FE funding over the last seven years have had a disproportionate impact on already marginalised groups in our society. Part-time courses in Scottish colleges have been halved and for those unable to support themselves and without someone on which they can rely for support, full-time study is frequently not an option. So, for those who can no longer access their chosen area of study because of cuts and the requirement to study full-time, FE has, in effect, disappeared. The building is still there but of little use if you cannot access its provision. Although Thomas and Gunson (2017) offer laudable suggestions for the development of the skills sector (which was their remit), this does not offer a full picture of the changes required to

FE in order to make it once again a sector for all. A re-imagining of the possibilities of the sector beyond the focus of preparation for work or as a bastion for 'last chance' learning will in many ways mitigate many of the negatives of the last seven years of policy change and restructure. Regionalisation with a focus on community development, and school and university partnerships with a dual focus on equity and social justice in partnership with employability, would not detract from promoting economic sustainability, but as part of a broader national educational focus on citizenship, would enhance all aspects of FE. Scottish FE stands at the threshold of significant change over the next five years; the opportunities for positive change, to both counter previous mistakes and further develop a sector for all are boundless. As with academic and vocational knowledge, a focus on inclusion, equity, social justice, the national economy, along with the support and development of industry, are not mutually exclusive but could quite easily be, and should be, mutually inclusive.

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