

FE and Skills across the UK: the case of England

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Historical and systemic perspective

- **Expansion of post-16 participation and the social inclusion role of FE**
- **Systemic** - reactive relationship to schools, universities and the absence of employers
- **A marketised and bureaucratised national sector since 1992**
- **Relationship with economy and skills** – ‘skills supply’ role
- **Image of FE in England** – marginal yet important; unstable yet resilient; conflicted by its competing roles and relationships; weak professionalism yet committed workforce

The retrenchment of FE in England over past decade



- Reductions in adult participation and the funding squeeze
- Gove's 'Academic Turn' and academisation
- Problems of economic growth, investment and employer involvement
- Austerity and value for money – leads to Area-Based Reviews

Turning the corner?

- ‘Vocational Turn’ of policy – qualifications and apprenticeships
- Area-Based Reviews, higher profile and more pronounced role for local and regional authorities
- Brexit and the need for skill development
- But neoliberal model remains – marketised, competitive, inefficient and voluntarist
- Conditions for the resurgence of FE in England or still staggering along?
- The need for a fundamental shift from a reactive national sector to leadership of local learning and skills ‘ecosystems’?

FE as distinctive national sector or as part of a local learning system

Dimension	National sector	Local learning system
Provider role and function	Distinctive institutions in a marketised national sector	Connective progression and vocational hubs in local/regional skills systems
Concept of skill formation	Skills supply for employers	Skills co-production through new stronger partnerships between providers, employers and local authorities
Role of national and local government	Strong top-down policy levers (e.g. funding, inspection and performance indicators) and weak local government	More devolved 'policy frameworks' with greater local discretion regarding the allocation of funding and review of quality
Role of schools and other educational social partners	Market-oriented, autonomous and competing entities	Strong local collaborative partnership working and network building for progression and more effective outcomes for employers and learners
Role of employers	Voluntaristic - little incentive or obligation to engage locally	New incentives and regulatory frameworks to bring employers into local collaborative systems
Professionalism	Distinctive dual professionalism	Connective triple professionalism

Key questions

1. To what extent is technical and vocational education a fruitful site for policy learning across the four countries of the UK?
2. How far does the ‘vocational turn’ in England offer the space for FE providers to move from operating as a competitive national sector to playing a key role in more collaborative local learning systems?
3. How far does such a move open up the possibility of a UK policy learning ‘laboratory’ for FE and skills?