

# CELEBRATING TWENTY YEARS OF COLLEGE INDEPENDENCE

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Welcome

# Incorporating the past in visions of the future



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Twenty years ago radical change took place as colleges were freed from local authority control. The revolution had started five years earlier when the 1988 Education Reform Act introduced market forces into state schools.

After the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 and the resultant Incorporation the following year (page 3), however, colleges rapidly overtook schools and could now teach them a lesson or two — no wonder government officials were imploring college leaders to sponsor a new generation of academies at the Association of Colleges’ annual conference in Birmingham last November.

But what has happened to colleges over the last two decades? What are the prospects now as the Coalition offers new “freedoms” through strategies spelled out in New Challenges, New Chances in what many would describe as a period of “re-Incorporation”?

This supplement can only provide a snapshot and, in so doing, concentrates solely on the colleges and local adult and community services reshaped under the Act.

From what the politicians of both the Coalition and Labour Party say (page 4), Incorporation is “unfinished business” as colleges must get even closer to employers and the community through Local Enterprise Partnerships.

Were anyone to doubt the unfinished nature of the task, Association of Colleges chief executive Martin Doel (page 5) points out that the whole process of self-improvement and true autonomy envisaged

all those years ago will take at least another three to five years to complete.

But as coverage on pages 6 and 7 shows, protracted debates over who really owns or controls the sector have not stopped a remarkable upsurge of enterprise and entrepreneurialism in FE.

While it must be acknowledged that a few rogue college leaders overstepped the mark with dodgy deals and franchises — bringing unwelcome curtailment of freedom for the majority — the creative zeal of most, characterised lately by the Gazelle Colleges Group, has been remarkable.

It is clear that the revolution, started 20 years ago, is still in need of nurturing

The 20-year case study of City and Islington College shows just how far such zeal reaches into every corner of the curriculum and student population. However, the FE sector continues to suffer a relatively poor image. To a large

extent, as shown on page 10, this arises from the complexity of the sector and failure to identify a college “brand”.

But page 11 poses the question that perhaps a unified “brand” is impractical in light of the changing and burgeoning scope and size of colleges post-Incorporation.

And certainly, concerns at Ofsted that colleges might be over-reaching themselves haven’t aided the image situation of today.

It’s just the latest in a highly equivocal, nevertheless constructive, relationship between FE and its inspectorate, as inspectors present (Matthew Coffey) and past (David Sherlock, who was a member of the Lingfield inquiry into professionalism in colleges) testify on page 12.

But as new, more affordable learning opportunities emerge daily through the power of ICT (page 13) and as the quality of the FE estate improves despite the pressures of austerity (page 14), it is clear that the revolution, started 20 years ago, is still in need of nurturing.

As a last word, for now, in all this change, have we really kept sight of the true needs of FE?

Alan Tuckett, of the International Council for Adult Education, and David Igoe, from the Sixth Form Colleges Association, remind us on page 15 that the world of FE is bigger than the skills agenda that currently dominates.



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A history of Incorporation

# Twenty years of freedoms and constraints

The government announcement of a new FE commissioner to reform inadequate provision in the latest skills strategy Rigour and Responsiveness had mixed responses.

Sector leaders saw it as a necessary evil, while employers, notably the CBI, see it strengthening their hand as a counterweight to college freedoms in New Challenges, New Chances.

The timing of the new skills strategy was ironic — on the 20th anniversary of college Incorporation — but unsurprising.

As Julian Gravatt, assistant director of the Association of Colleges, voiced on previous significant anniversaries, tensions between freedom and constraint are always with us.

Colleges were incorporated in April 1993 primarily to remove funding from local government and keep down council tax bills while refocusing public-funded education on employer needs.

The previous decade saw mass unemployment and the collapse of apprenticeships and day release. Also,

there was a new clamour for alternatives to GCSEs for 16-year-olds.

The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) was created under the leadership of Bill (later Sir William) Stubbs and immediately gained a reputation for uncompromising efficiency by imposing 5 per cent “efficiency savings” year-on-year between 1994 and 1998 — years of austerity.

Optimism over Incorporation faded as a bitter dispute over lecturers’ contracts dragged on.

Meanwhile, imaginative leaders exploited an increasingly arcane funding approach, over-reaching themselves with resulting inquiries in 1999 into franchising abuses at Halton and Bilston.

Also, a demand-led element (DLE) of funding offered growth on the cheap — unlimited numbers of students could be recruited above agreed targets at half funding.

Yet again, overly inventive college leaders excelled, but proved too successful and the Treasury called a halt.

Sir Geoff Hall, former FEFC finance director and now chair of the Information Authority, said: “It all started so promisingly.

“The first couple of years demonstrated that funding could be efficiently channelled to the 400 plus colleges and external institutions that came under the FEFC’s aegis.

“Most colleges took Incorporation very seriously and with one or two exceptions governance was reasonably soundly based. The doom mongers had been proved wrong.”

Despite the FEFC imposition of an audit regime of unequalled severity to curtail excesses, it was felt the council had lost the plot, and New Labour arrived to merge all quangos into a single organisation — the Learning and Skills Council — to plan as well as fund all post-16 education.

Employer-led training and enterprise councils went and regional development agencies emerged.

Colleges enjoyed record funding, taking the largest share of the market, and adult

and community learning flourished following Green Paper The Learning Age, as did widening participation following the seminal report by Baroness Helena Kennedy.

But colleges felt their real freedoms had been curtailed and optimism again faded. New looming austerity saw adult learner numbers slashed by 1.4m in two years and the Leitch review of UK skills needs for 2020 introduced tough utilitarian reforms despite wider promises in Success for All.

The arrival of the Coalition government promised a return of those freedoms. But recent developments raise questions. Matthew Coffey, Ofsted learning and skills director, in an interview with FE Week, said: “I have to say colleges are not taking up those freedoms as we would have expected them to.”

The question now is whether the promises of freedoms outlined in New Challenges, New Chances will be fulfilled or whether they will be set back as so often before by unforeseen contingencies and demands.

# Fair funding leads to focus on learners



Incorporation freed colleges to respond to market forces and student needs, but it was a standard national funding system that allowed them to act, says Lynne Sedgmore

Incorporation in 1993 gave colleges the welcome ability to respond quickly and flexibly to changing circumstances.

Colleges became legally free to adjust their staffing, to reshape delivery methods and remodel their estates as needed, without unnecessary restraint from local bureaucracy.

By itself however, this operational autonomy would have been insufficient to guarantee responsiveness to the demands of students.

The single most important step in

ensuring such a focus was the introduction of a standard national funding system that reflected student numbers and necessary differences in the cost of provision.

In effect, the funding system introduced by the Further Education Funding Council and carried on by the Learning and Skills Council, created the level playing field necessary for the operation of a free and open market.

It contained incentives for efficiency, but in general did not seek to distort the market in one direction or another, reflecting variations in the cost of teaching different subjects, working in different areas and supporting different types of students.

It is important to keep this simple point in mind because over the past 20 years there has been a constant temptation to use the funding system in a more manipulative way, usually with damaging results.

The competition between institutions introduced by a demand-led funding model has been generally healthy — it has encouraged innovation and helped high quality provision to expand.

However, perverse outcomes are certain to follow where funding levers are pulled too hard and too sharply, or there are crude attempts to steer provision according to prevailing political fashion, as was the case in the franchising debacle of the mid-1990s, in programmes that simply assessed existing competence under Train to Gain or in the recruitment of longstanding employees to adult apprenticeships.

It is good that in their recent reports both Professor Alison Wolf and Sir Michael Wilshaw spoke out about the dangers posed by ill-thought financial incentives.

As well as supporting a well-functioning market, the FE funding model has had other successes.

The convergence process removed unjustified differences between those institutions that had always been generously funded and those that had been starved of cash.

What is needed going forward is more such fine-tuning and less wholesale redesign

Interestingly, it has taken nearly 20 years more for similar unjustified differences between college and sixth-form funding to be properly addressed.

FE funding incorporated the disadvantage uplift over a decade before politicians started to talk about a pupil premium in schools, and the mechanism for additional learning support (ALS) was key to driving up the extent and quality of provision for learners with learning difficulties or disabilities.

The sector has learned from the weaknesses of both models.

The lack of evidence on how the disadvantage uplift was spent makes it hard to assess its impact, while the excessive requirements for accountability around ALS led ultimately to wholesale gaming. The new arrangements seek to strike a better balance.

What is needed going forward is more such fine-tuning and less wholesale redesign.

Every three or four years government seeks to introduce fundamental reform, always described as simplification and usually also as making the system more responsive — and on most occasions neither description has been true.

Currently, two different departments are developing increasingly divergent models for young people and adults — a move that will certainly complicate planning and increase overheads — and at the same time there are suggestions that funding for adult skills should go directly to employers, while others argue that it should go into a single funding pot administered by local enterprise partnerships.

Now is a good time to remember the very real benefits brought about by a single national funding methodology and the damage done to learners when we have got it wrong.

Lynne Sedgmore is executive director of the 157 Group

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Politics

# Seeking solutions in testing times

It’s not just a lack of government cash that is bringing about a redefinition of the relationship between learner, state and employer

One thing’s for certain: there will be no money for immediate initiatives in FE for the next five years.

Colleges will have to find new roles to ensure they are a central part of the skills agenda.

There are stark differences between the Coalition and Labour over the future of FE, but on this point they agree. They also agree that the way forward can be found in the latest report from the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning, chaired by Frank McLoughlin, principal of City & Islington College.

Gordon Marsden, Shadow Skills Minister, says the triple impact of austerity, technological change and the demand for new styles of learning and training for lifelong progression need urgent response.

“At the time of Incorporation 20 years ago the number of people working for themselves and in micro-businesses wanting training and skills for lifelong learning was pretty small,” he says.

“We are now dealing with a substantially different profile, so people want different learning structures with different needs.”

Marsden says within the next five years learners will demand a more fluid online system. Plus, he says, the 1993 “silos” between FE, higher education and online

learning will fold into one another within the next 10 to 15 years.

“Mr McLoughlin is already laying the ground for some of these arguments — the two-way street between providers and employers, and the need for properly-taught dual professionals in colleges and work, etc.” says Marsden.

For him, the strength of colleges will be the progressive skills they offer, saying: “If the mantra under Blair was ‘education, education, education’ then under the next Labour government it will be ‘progression, progression, progression’.”

Colleges are, he says, at an “extraordinary cusp”, affected by economic change and the proposals in a range of reports on skills and apprenticeships — not least the Richard, Holt and Heseltine reviews. But there is “unfinished business” beyond skills, he says.

“If you look at all the issues that have come up in FE, it’s controversies between active and inactive benefits, Esol entitlements, fee loans post-24 . . . even the suggested loans 19-24,” explains Marsden.

“They all point to the same thing: the need to strike a balance between learner, state and employer. We tried to address this with individual learning accounts and The Learning Age. A decade on,

that fundamental question still has to be addressed. We have not reached a settled conclusion on that.”

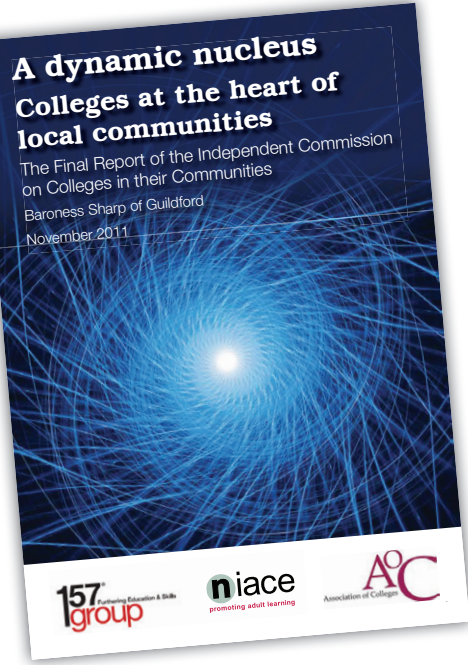
For David Hughes, chief executive of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), this wider question is an issue that, however crucial, the skills debate must not bury. He refers to Baroness Sharp’s commission into the role of colleges in their communities, commissioned in 2010 by NIACE, the Association of Colleges and the 157 Group.

The report concluded top-down accountability, which was being stripped away by the Coalition government, meant colleges had to be more transparent about their use of increasingly scarce resources, in quality, in outcomes for learners, in curriculum design and so on.

“The elegance of this proposition was based on the evidence that NIACE never ceases to broadcast: that there are many people in a local economy who will not demand learning, who are not confident and empowered customers,” says Hughes.

“That is, in part, why they ‘need’ to get into learning. In a customer-driven system their needs are not catered for; in a system with outward accountability they should be listened out for.”

Since the Sharp report there have been



“more freedoms and flexibilities” from government; the arrival of local enterprise partnerships and health and well-being boards, and employers being given more control through employer ownership pilots.

“All these reinforce the need and the benefits of a new accountability for colleges,” says Hughes.

“There may be many pitfalls ahead for colleges in these new arrangements, but colleges as civic leaders will be able to act as partners and balance the needs of employers, communities and learners.”

## A sector in charge of its own destiny



**Incorporation may have been a challenge too far for many, but it has left colleges free to meet the needs of their local areas, says Matthew Hancock**

I must admit that Incorporation was an event that rather passed me by in 1993 — I was rather more occupied preparing to

take GCSEs. It was, nevertheless, an event that profoundly influenced my life because I went on to take an A-level at the newly-incorporated West Cheshire College and, in due course, to take on my current role as minister.

At the time, many people in the sector and in Parliament saw the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act as an intensely ideological, centralising measure, as it took colleges and polytechnics — and the money that went with them — out of local education authority (LEA) control and made principals accountable.

So, too, the remit of the new Further Education Funding Council that made clear that colleges’ main purpose was to provide courses leading to a list of vocational qualifications specified by the Secretary of State.

Many feared this would be the death knell for both the study of humanities in FE and informal adult education.

Yet the incorporation of colleges as free-standing legal entities has led to professionalisation of their leadership.

For a very few colleges, Incorporation was a challenge too far, leading to risky

business plans, failed enterprises and poor financial control.

“With freedom comes greater need for colleges to demonstrate they are working in the best interests of their learners

The knee-jerk reaction of the last government to this handful of cases was to introduce new controls across the board on governance and funding, to tie leaders up in knots, to restrict both their freedom to act and the incentives that come from being held robustly to account.

Our changes since 2010 have freed colleges from this mass of restrictions so

that they can once again take charge of their own destinies.

Free colleges are able to develop a wider and healthier relationship with local partners — including communities, local enterprise partnerships and, crucially, directly with employers — than they had in the days of LEA control. They can develop to meet the needs of their local areas.

With freedom comes greater need for colleges to demonstrate they are working in the best interests of their learners, employers and broader communities.

Accountability matters, so more data on student outcomes is necessary. And strengthened governance matters too, to hold principals’ feet to the fire on behalf of students.

The government’s efforts to secure greater transparency and accountability continue, but to an increasing extent with colleges as willing partners.

That is the best way to preserve colleges’ freedom — and to help ensure everyone in the UK is given the chance to reach their potential.

**Skills Minister Matthew Hancock**

Challenges

# Leave us alone to get on with it, says Doel

Incorporation as the start of a challenge, not the end of one

The journey to college self-improvement needs at least three to five years without political intervention, says Martin Doel (pictured), chief executive of the Association of Colleges.

“I’m one of life’s optimists,” he insists. “We can achieve this through New Challenges, New Chances, which gives at least the prospect of ‘re-Incorporation’ after a period where we saw many central controls reintroduced.”

But he is also a realist and knows there has to be a trade-off. Doel reckons it was a big mistake to see Incorporation in 1993 as “the end of a journey”, rather than a beginning. Ken Clarke, then Education Secretary who saw the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act through Parliament, told colleges they were free and said: “Let 100 flowers bloom.”

And how they bloomed; until the spectacular scandal of mismanagement at Derby College, Wilmorton. The Shattock inquiry painted an extraordinary picture of negligence and an attempted cover-up at a college spending an annual £10m of taxpayers’ money on outlandish ventures such as Oscars, a city centre nightclub.

The chair and three governors quit, as the board was accused of failing to curb an impetuous principal.

Subsequently, a new funding formula led to a franchising bubble that ended in 1999 with inquiries at Halton and Bilston. The whole sector was tarred with the brush of negligence and freedoms were curtailed.

“The government needs the courage of its convictions

“How you exercise freedom and how that develops should have been seen as the start of a journey,” says Doel. And at the start is where the sector is now, he says, after “the journey was further delayed by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) silos and bureaucratic controls”.

And so to the trade-off: “We must make sure this time that we give no one any excuse for arresting that journey. Also, the government needs the courage of its convictions, rather than stop us prematurely as the City Deals and local enterprise partnerships (LEPs), etc, develop, all of which could be seen as reasons to take away freedoms before they’ve had time to fully develop.”

But if LEPs turn out to be no different to the training and enterprise councils of the 1990s, which often overlaid work colleges did rather than call on them, much will be lost.

“This won’t happen if what we see in New Challenges, New Chances is allowed to happen but, as I’ve said before, this needs three, possibly five, years to develop. That is where the FE Guild comes in,” he says.

“It needs to be here in five years’ time to help make teaching and learning as good as it can be, and to help professionals define them, rather than have others come in and tell us what to do.”

There is also the need to develop good leadership and governing bodies competent in their roles and responsibilities to the community if the sector is to avoid any Wilmorton or franchising abuse revival.

Dame Ruth Silver, chair of the Learning and Skills Improvement Service, emphasised this point in recent *FE Week* supplement Effective Leadership and Governance.

“A college governing body has to take care of the college so that it is of service to the local community, which sometimes means doing things that are difficult for the college,” she said.

Colleges may be in a different place



compared with 1993, but that is no cause for complacency. Back to Doel, who says:

“The guild won’t do it on its own. The institutions will, but the guild must facilitate and help colleges to make the most of this journey.”

He sees three priorities. First, that governing bodies challenge their executive and staff to improve teaching and learning, and have methods to check progress.

Second, see how colleges meet the needs of students and employers. And finally, check finances are healthy.

“We are in a strong position to develop and secure reincorporation despite the austerity — if we keep improving,” he says.

## Lessons from the other side of the world



**Successful changes to how FE institutions are governed in New Zealand should prompt scrutiny of governance in British institutions, says Janice Shiner**

New Challenges, New Chances completes what was started in 1993, when colleges were taken out of local education authority control and given a degree of independence. The sector is now in a very different place, with colleges having almost all the freedoms and

flexibilities they need to determine their own destiny.

It feels much more like my New Zealand experience where equivalent organisations were run by chief executives with an eye on the next opportunity and their position in the local and global education market. They had for some time worked in a fees and loans regime for much of adult provision, but with the freedom to develop new programmes and take them to market.

There are no awarding bodies in New Zealand: polytechnics (college equivalents) can award their own qualifications, including degrees. Nobody questions whether a degree from, say, the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic [an institution in a small city] is credible.

It is clear the freedom created the space for innovation. It carried risks, of course, and needed a fast, high-quality response to failure — by the institution and, if not successful, by the Tertiary Education Commission [the body responsible for funding tertiary education in New Zealand].

An appointed commissioner provided a communication link between the funder and the polytechnic’s board, and made independent recommendations to the

government on the best way forward.

But it is perhaps two other changes that have made the biggest difference in recent times, first, the introduction of an investment plan where institutions agree in advance what they will deliver in return for government funds (at a reasonable level of detail and in response to robust analysis of local need confirmed by stakeholders) and second, changes to governance.

“There are no awarding bodies in New Zealand

Each polytechnic governing body has up to eight members. The chair and three others are appointed by the government and four by the community. There are no staff or student members (institutions are expected to put in place ways of consulting with key stakeholders). Early evaluation confirms the benefits, not least greater strategic understanding of the issues facing the polytechnic and more robust

monitoring, including greater performance management of the chief executive.

For me, governance in English colleges is the one area that has not been subject to the sort of scrutiny and challenge that is needed in the new environment. Perhaps some governing bodies are too big, too fragmented, too focused on the wrong things. In the colleges that are getting into trouble, either through financial mismanagement or poor quality, governing bodies cannot possibly be asking the right questions and robustly monitoring the outcomes of actions taken. A commission on governance is long overdue.

Incorporation has been a long, slow and sometimes frustrating journey and, at times, has felt like two steps forward and one step back. But if incorporation in 1993 was a big step change for the sector, then the challenge this time feels bigger. We have a sector that is mature and ready to take it on.

**Janice Shiner, former principal Leicester College and director general of lifelong learning at the DfES, spent three years in New Zealand as chief executive of the Tertiary Education Commission**

## The business

# The rise of the entrepreneurial college

Former hairdressing apprentice Jodie Whitmore (pictured right) is running her own salon at the age of 20 while completing a foundation degree at West Nottinghamshire College.

Just four years ago, she started her NVQ with no school-leaver qualifications and looked destined to add to the growing bank of NEET statistics. But Asha Khemka, her college principal, had other ideas with the creation of the Ashfield Centre aimed at capturing the likes of Jodie.

Nineteen-year-old Joseph Johnson (also pictured) is a similar entrepreneurial success story. While studying professional cookery at the college, he helped create the Forest Ferret company, producing and selling jams and preserves.

When Khemka launched the Ashfield Centre, she discovered that public funding would never meet the centre's needs and so founded the Inspire and Achieve Foundation — a charity separate from the college — to fund it.

Based in former South Yorkshire coal-mining communities with severe cycles of inter-generational deprivation, the college had to act, she says.

In September, Khemka launches Vision Entrepreneur — a programme designed to support the job-creators of tomorrow — where enterprising students from the college and local sixth-forms will learn what it takes to succeed in business while hearing

from inspirational guest speakers.

Similar initiatives can be seen springing up elsewhere, and not just for NEETs.

Among them is the Gazelle Group of 20 colleges, launched in April 2011, which its chief executive, Fintan Donohue, describes as “subversive” in intent.

“The group promotes the idea of entrepreneurial colleges as a disruptive influence for positive change in the purpose of colleges and the nature of their offer,” he says.

Colleges have been striving for a more enterprising approach ever since incorporation — reaching out to the community, creating arms-length college companies which reinvest profits in learning, and franchising courses to reach people in the workplace, but they too often came to grief for overstepping the mark or being accused of using public funds for private training. But, more recently, it has been seen as quite respectable for colleges have come to the rescue of collapsed or failed enterprises, such as the Newcastle College Group takeover of Carter & Carter and Khemka's own college appropriation of training company Pearson in Practice.

Several factors are forcing a change of attitude and approach, says Donohue.

“Traditional colleges and qualifications no longer provide the career opportunities they once did,” he explains.

“Young people are more open to



the sort of entrepreneurship already established in countries like India and Africa. Technological change is rapidly replacing colleges and classrooms as the route to knowledge and skill. And the recent European Commission report makes entrepreneurial education its number one priority.”

This constitutes a far more generalised rather than utilitarian view of students being enterprising and entrepreneurial, he says.

“We need people who are ‘enterprising’ in all the dimensions of their life, not just about their career paths and financial investments,” explains Donohue.

For Sally Dicketts, principal of Oxford & Cherwell Valley College (a Gazelle member) the way to bring the best of the past and



present together is through the creation of a learning company, where students are employed in real commercial operations as a significant part of their college experience. From September, business students will work in administration and marketing, media students will make films for local businesses, motor vehicle students will provide MOTs to paying customers and art students will develop community art projects.

A tutor-led and assessed programme taking 30 hours a week will combining work experience and individual study.

“At the end of their programme they can choose to work permanently in the learning company or with our own employment agency to gain employment or progress into higher education,” she says.

## Forming an orderly queue to improve customer service

When the Association of Colleges helped give 31 enterprising colleges a permanent presence in India earlier this year, the initiative required a level of customer service to match that of the best export companies.

Education export services are already worth £14bn a year to the UK and are expected to rise to at least £22bn by 2020. So it was no surprise the trip to India involved Skills Minister Matthew Hancock helping, in his own words, “co-ordinate the government's support for education as an export industry”.

And yet, 20 years ago, before Incorporation, colleges were largely characterised as public institutions focused on qualifications with little or no customer service, communication and marketing.

Jim Horrocks, former principal of Barnsfield College, recalls his first year in post when he observed growing queues waiting for a door to be opened at 2pm to process people for enrolment.

Something had to be done and the responsive college programme led by the FE Staff College, Blagdon, was designed to encourage colleges to prepare for market-

led change that exploded during the 1990s.

Gazelle Group chief executive Fintan Donohue, (pictured) a member of that first team, says: “The responsive college programme promoted the idea of student as a customer and we spent much time with colleges, helping them recruit, train and support marketing managers for the very first time.”

The main legacy is seen in the Responsive College Unit (RCU), which continued as an independent agency after Incorporation, says Peter Davies, marketing consultant with the Policy Consortium.

He had helped create the College Marketing Network in 1987, which was crucial to supporting the RCU success and is still going, with around 180 members and an award scheme and annual conference in November.

But Incorporation brought a

considerably more focused approach. “My impression of the marketing staff who attend is that their professionalism and competence has improved out of all recognition compared with the early days, and that the best practice in the sector now would be outstanding among any service organisations with comparable budgets,” says Davies.

Analysing customers and colleges in the 1999 publication Managing External Relations in Schools and Colleges, Davies points to the key change as that of a move from promotion to marketing. Far more precise market research was needed to inform decisions about curriculum development, stimulated in 1994 by the legal requirement on colleges to produce strategic plans.

“As a consequence, colleges adapted their management information systems (MIS) for the purposes of marketing intelligence, which had not been a

primary consideration in their original design,” he says.

The workload on managers was incredible, says Carole Overton. “I was assistant principal at Deeside College. My responsibilities included marketing along with MIS, funding, planning, external work from companies, admissions, student services and multimedia learning and a few odd extras like nurseries. How I did all that I don't know,” she says.

In those early days, there was often something of a wish and a prayer in the operations. Andrew Morris, formerly director of marketing and development at City and Islington College, recalls: “Bizarrely, I became director of marketing and development in my college with no background in the former. Someone had to do it.

“In fact I read about Ruth Silver's approach at Lewisham College in a marketing magazine, took her advice and hired in a Blue Chip company. Certainly the quality and punch shot up; then it was taken back in-house and then the capacity and budget increased enormously with external recruitment — and the level of sophistication we see in FE today.”

## A success story

# Four into one equals success



**City and Islington College, born in 1993, has faced challenges aplenty in its 20 years. Despite the blips, a birthday study shows how it has championed the community it serves, writes Andrew Morris**

Take two FE colleges, one sixth-form centre and one adult education service, mix together slowly, simmer on a gentle heat and what do you get after 20 years? Something “outstanding in every single measure”, says Ofsted; “a model for others”, says a citation for one of the college's Queen's Anniversary prizes; “exemplars in the field”, say the words of the Learning Skills Improvement Service's beacon award.

For most colleges in 1993, just taking over the multiplicity of corporate services from the local authority seemed challenge enough; the imposition of a new funding methodology at the same time looked decidedly risky. What crazy people would aggravate the situation by adding a cross-sector, four-way merger to the mix? Answer: Islington people.

To understand this paradox, City and Islington College decided last year to organise a study of its life. With the former principal, Tom Jupp, I interviewed staff of all types and vintages, pored over ancient statistics and spoke to students, past and present. The analysis, yet to be completed, throws light not only on the college's path to 2013 but on many issues affecting the world of learning and skills. The story that emerges is one of immense change — no surprises there — but, unexpectedly, one that we found retold consistently by teachers, learning supporters, students, business support staff, premises personnel.

So what are the headlines?

“It's more systematic, it's tighter; we're more accountable,” say the staff; “the quality of teaching and support is fantastic,” say the students; “they showed us how to grow up, love learning and move on to further things,” say the alumni — to paraphrase 48 interviews. Beneath the headlines lies a little more nuance. “There are also losses,” say the staff who mourn the freedoms they enjoyed before the age

of indicators; “it gets harder and harder, competing for grades and jobs,” say the students.

One of the greatest changes is from paper-based to online systems (see table). Computerised management information has transformed the college's knowledge of its strengths and weakness; online business processes have streamlined personnel, recruitment and financial control.

Then there are the changes that came with new business influences in governance. In came new expertise in real estate and finance; sites were consolidated and well equipped and attractive new buildings created, much better suited to modern learning in convenient locations.

Learning has been enriched by online access to materials and opportunities available in every classroom, library and learning support areas. The curriculum has grown — forensic sciences, veterinary nursing, media technology — and with it have come opportunities for new kinds of enterprise and partnership, providing students with real work experience.

## An extremely positive image of what FE can do for a community emerges from this study

But the path of growth and development has not been quite as smooth as these changes might suggest. Political swings and economic turbulence leave their trace over 20 years. Enrichment activity, once the preserve of more privileged schools and universities, stimulated aspirations for higher education and supported vulnerable people at critical moments. It opened up a world of possibilities — intellectual, enterprising, cultural and social — but as resources have reduced, the college has struggled to maintain what it can.

Even more severe have been the changes in funding for adult learners, with rising



City and Islington College's new sixth form campus, in Goswell Road, London, and inset, the old campus in Benwell Road, London

fee levels and diminished Esol funding systematically reducing their number. Swings in government attitudes to school sixth forms have also proved a challenge.

The 11 to 16 partner schools of the Sixth Form Centre (now College) long ago pooled their small sixth forms and paved the way for the enormous success of this part of the college, but today separate small sixth forms are back in vogue.

By contrast, some aspects of college life have developed. Careers guidance, counselling and supported learning services have improved, as have procedures for safeguarding vulnerable young people and adults, support for learning, and attention to pedagogy.

New vocational curriculum areas have been introduced to meet new demand in areas such as counselling, beauty therapy and sports science. Others, such as electrical engineering, have closed. Higher education provision and courses providing access to higher education have increased, particularly on the vocational side. ‘Social mobility’ has been supported for thousands of people going on to higher education: 1,315 in 2012, including 98 to Russell group universities.

So what of the overall picture?

The first 20 years at City and Islington have certainly seen challenges aplenty, as they have for colleges everywhere. Contract negotiations in the early 1990s, vacillating national policy on qualifications and funding, increasing group sizes, greater workloads, repeated restructuring and redundancies — all have left their mark.

Yet whatever the external stresses over the years, an extremely positive image of what FE can do for a community emerges from this study of a single college over two decades.

It shows students and staff united in valuing the quality of their relationship, and their respect for one another as the key to successful learning. The college's unremitting emphasis on its students, their learning and support, is backed by all in the college community — from security guard to director of finance.

Perhaps the last word should go to a former student interviewed for the study. In describing the experience from a student's point of view, Huseyin Acar told us: “Without the college, I would just have worked in a small shop as lots of people in my position do. This college gives a chance to people. It opened my way, so I could see the opportunities. The college allowed me to choose and gave me the tools to achieve my objectives. It gave me advice, guidance and personal support. It's a long term relationship. We've run this journey together.”

Huseyin began as an Esol student at 16, progressed through A-levels to university and in two years expects to be an architect. His long-term ambition is to become a governor of the college.

**Andrew Morris, a former director at the City and Islington College**

### The impact of social networking and marketing at City & Islington

**37% increase in website traffic in 2012 (1.2 million hits)**

**70% of applications now online**

**10% of traffic in 2012 was via mobiles (college has an app)**

**14,000 views of clips on YouTube**

**2,500 students engaged via Twitter or Facebook**

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## Brand

# How do you solve a problem like ‘college’?

Public confusion about the identity of a “college”, poor media perception of FE and a lack of skills among college press officers combine to prevent the sector getting better media coverage, it is argued.

A brief study of journalists’ perceptions of the sector for FE Week points to a continued poor understanding among news editors — the “gatekeepers” of the national media.

But it also reveals a failure among college press officers to spot and promote good stories, suggesting a lack of practical journalistic skills and experience.

Education correspondents interviewed for the study said it was rare for a college press officer to really show a clear understanding of what makes a story.

One said: “Despite having media studies degrees, they don’t seem to understand the difference between marketing and communications.”

Janet Murray, a regular writer for *FE Week* and the Guardian and founder of the Last Word media consultancy, said: “People constantly come to me with stories about buildings and not policy or people. There is a clear lack of training and expertise.

“There is a lack of space in the media and editors want the nitty-gritty about education maintenance allowances and apprenticeships.”

Liz Lightfoot, former Daily Telegraph education correspondent, said there was a perennial problem of attitude among news editors — “One comment from a news editor was that everyone has been to school and knows about university, but not everyone knows about further education.” But she echoes Murray’s concern,

saying “press officers need to rise to the challenge”.

There is no doubt that media coverage has improved since incorporation, with the rise of national online services and high-profile trade media.

TES FE Focus was launched in 1995 and quickly followed by Guardian Further.

While the latter closed and FE Focus has moved to become online only, the not-even-two years old *FE Week* is now the only newspaper dedicated to the sector.

Problems of a poor public understanding of FE have been revealed in work by the Association of Colleges (AoC).

A survey for the AoC by ICM Research in 2011 showed the confusion in the public mind about the identity of a college.

Two thirds (72 per cent) of the public thought Trinity College Cambridge was an FE college and over half thought the same of Eton.

Just over half believed they were still run by local authorities and one-in-five said they weren’t inspected by Ofsted. Nearly a quarter assumed they took less pastoral care of students than schools.

But once it was explained what colleges did, their impression was very favourable and more than 80 per cent said they would be happy for their children to go to one and thought they made an important contribution to the local economy.

Around 90 per cent concluded they gave people a second chance at education.

One answer may be to make colleges “a recognisable ‘brand’.” Work for the AoC by the consultancy Branded concluded, however, that this would be highly problematic.

## When is a college not a college?



When its bosses decide to run with what they hope is an evocative ‘brand’ title or cleverly-formed acronym.

Ok, so they remain colleges in reality — but not in name.

Among those to have dropped the C word are West Nottinghamshire College, which became Vision West Notts in September 2011.

South Nottingham College is now Central College Nottingham, but it’s planning to become simply ‘Central’ over the next few years.

And just a year after the 2008 merger

of North Devon College and East Devon College, the new institution became Petroc — named after Saint Petroc, the patron saint of the Devon flag.

Newcastle College Group is now just NCG, and North East Surrey College Of Technology? Why that’s Nescot, of course.

Meanwhile, last year’s merger of London’s Southwark College and Lewisham College has resulted in plans for a new name of, wait for it ... LeSoCo.

First, unlike the word ‘university’ which has a legal definition, the word ‘college’ has an established usage elsewhere in schools.

Second, FE colleges cover a diverse range of activities targeted at different audiences, making an all-encompassing brand potentially so broad as to be meaningless or even self-defeating.

One possibility suggested by Branded is for the sector to agree on a common set of

values over and above individual products and services.

They could then adopt a kitemark or Charter mark, indicating membership of the AoC for example, in the way that travel agents might belong to ABTA.

It is the sort of proposal that makes the government’s proposed Chartered status for the further education sector, currently out for consultation, possibly even more attractive.

# ‘If that doesn’t work, we do it again.’ Really?

**Next time you come across a member of your college marketing staff, treat him or her gently. They’re a much misunderstood lot, says Nick Warren**

In 1990 I was one of the first people in FE to have the word marketing in my job title. There were very few of us, and we were not popular.

We were guilty of spin, sharp salesmanship (I wish) and the dark arts. We were the Mandelsons of our time. This wasn’t what education should be doing. It’s a noble pursuit and marketing had no place in it.

We all had trouble at home and we stuck together and formed something called the Marketing Network as a mutual support mechanism. It’s still going.

Come 1993 and it all changed. Competition, the DLE (demand led

element) and the battle for bums on seats began and it was open warfare. Suddenly we weren’t doing enough of the dark arts. Heavens, jobs are at stake man!

Academic staff felt no shame about telling us how to do our jobs. Guerrilla marketing became common. There are some shocking stories from that period of people gate-crashing school careers’ fairs, bounty money (complicated), free gifts, theft, even the cunning use of projectors. It was exciting. But throughout this the marketing managers would still get together for a beer and to commiserate. Who else understood us?

Then the Further Education Funding Council noticed college marketing budgets were spiralling out of control and the National Audit Office showed up looking at value for money.

They never did work it out, but we calmed down a bit and ground on with

the job of being creative, poaching Year 11s and trawling the patch for punters. Budgets were trimmed and we got creative and dangerous again.

But marketing staff have a foot within the college and a foot outside. They have knowledge of both domains. The expectation was that they took messages out. The reality was that they also brought messages back. And some of these were unwelcome.

But there were always two critical problems. FE still has them.

The first is that marketing does not enjoy the same legislative hinterland as human resources, finance and health and safety. Marketing managers are still called on, or instructed, by college managers to do things that probably won’t work, but cost a small fortune. They can’t counter by calling on legislation. I recall one chap telling me:

“At our college, if a course fails to recruit we put an advert in the paper. If that doesn’t work, we do it again.”

The second was, and is, that despite the fact that all of us are constantly surrounded by the products of FE (get your car fixed, go to a hotel, have a haircut, buy a sandwich, call a plumber, there they all are), but all that’s mentioned is who validated the qualification — “I’ve got my City and Guilds,” you’ll hear, or “My son’s doing his BTec,” and then there’s “I’ve got an RSA”.

The college is seldom mentioned — FE is ubiquitous and strangely invisible. Marketing managers, I salute you. It’s a hell of a job.

**Nick Warren, freelance marketing specialist and consultant with the Policy Consortium**

## Funding

# The post-Incorporation college: a not-so-sleeping giant

Leeds City College is one of the single largest providers of apprenticeships in the UK following the launch of the Apprenticeship Training Agency — jointly owned with the local authority — and the creation of the Food Academy at city centre restaurant Flannels.

Now the third largest college in the UK with more than 40,000 students, 1,500 staff and an annual turnover of £90m, it is a far cry from 1993 and incorporation when the then small Kitson College was rebranded Leeds College of Technology.

Since then, one factor more than almost any other has contributed to the changing size and scope of FE — that’s merger.

While the Coalition may be sceptical of the rush to merge, as have all previous administrations at times, the merger bandwagon has rolled on over 20 years with the creation of giants such as Newcastle College Group, Bedford and New College Nottingham. The litany of colleges absorbed into Leeds City

includes Park Lane, Airedale, Wharfedale, Keighley, Thomas Danby, Joseph Priestley and Leeds College of Music (which retains its name as a wholly-owned subsidiary).

But what has changed beyond the size? On one level, less than you might think, according to Peter Roberts, (pictured) the principal since 2009 and chair of the 157

group. “Skills I need for the job of chief executive have changed,” he says.

“Curriculum and quality used to be my strengths, but now I’m expected to be a politician, have networks, be around 24/7 and definitely not disappear for four or five weeks’ holiday.”

He still draws greatest strength from his curriculum roots.

“When I do my weekly blog and can write ‘I remember when I was a teacher...’ I know that adds to my credibility,” says Roberts.

And with ultimate responsibility for diverse operations from estates management and customer services to complex MIS and dealing with every level from pre-entry level students to HE for foundation degrees, now at record levels, “I need to be able to manage teams of people with skills I don’t have.”

What has not changed, Roberts insists, is the fundamental curriculum ideas and

chances FE offers.

“At one time we were a tertiary college offering shipbuilding apprenticeships and flour milling. Now even the face of motor mechanics has changed and we offer advanced manufacturing and technology skills,” he says.

“But it’s still what it always was — a relevant curriculum.

“FE is, or should be, what it has always been at its best — bespoke tailoring of vocational education to suit individual needs.” But that tailoring — possible, he says, because of the economies of scale size brings — is bringing something new.

Work-based programmes, online learning and, recently, incubation start-up units helped create 300 new micro-businesses and 700 jobs in Leeds last year.

Work with business is a key area with Leeds City College having established links with more than 2,500 public, private and third sector companies from small and medium-sized enterprises to major



# The day a cheque for £1.8m arrived



**Julian Gravatt remembers the first week of Incorporation. The reforms may be a distant memory, but they still pack a punch to this day**

Ruth Silver, then principal, held an event for local stakeholders to persuade them the college was on the turn.

Meanwhile, in the finance office, we switched off the council’s computer system.

The college started life with no cash, but a week later a cheque for £1.8m arrived in an envelope from the Further Education Funding Council.

If it hadn’t come, we’d have had to delay the payroll beyond Easter . . . but all’s well that ends well.

Within a year or so, we had survived the bankruptcy of our training and enterprise council, secured an excellent inspection grade and were negotiating a £10m loan to fund a new building.

Twenty years on, Incorporation is a distant memory, but the reforms it brought still have an impact.

Incorporation was a collective experience for colleges that introduced a degree of standardisation to a diverse sector.

A small and ambitious funding council introduced far-reaching changes that are still with us today: national prices and rules, an emphasis on qualifications,

a comprehensive data collection and a process for merging institutions.

In the years that followed, standardisation has allowed other sector organisations to operate and has given the English college sector a strength it might otherwise lack.

**“If [the cheque] hadn’t come, we’d have had to delay the payroll beyond Easter**

Incorporation gave colleges their freedom, but funding realities forced them to make quick changes. After years of relative neglect, they found themselves in a relentless annual cycle of policy and budget reform. Although it is easy to count the costs and the losses, the sector has become more flexible and able to manage change.

household names including Arriva, First, Debenhams, IKEA, Lloyds TSB and BAe Systems.

Roberts warns, however, against FE losing sight of its other fundamental purposes.

With the disappearance of unskilled and semi-skilled work, “we are seeing more and more people with disadvantaged backgrounds, NEETs are rising and there’s more work to be done with Job centres,” he says.

“If colleges like us did not do the work, it’s difficult to know who would pick it up.”

So, despite the austerity we now face, he pleads with FE leaders not to lose sight of the basics, the LLDD learners, the mother returning to learn by doing flower arranging and finding a new career path and the young disaffected person in danger of becoming a NEET by being forced down an inappropriate route.

“For example, in Leeds, healthcare and digital technology are the big thing. But if I tell young people who want to be hairdressers this is what they must do, they will quit and become NEETs,” explains Roberts.

“We need to have time and patience to guide people appropriately. This is what FE at its best has always been good at.”

Colleges have successfully tackled adult basic skills, worked with employers on apprenticeships and helped millions of young people move from school to work.

One rarely noticed the legacy of Incorporation was charitable status for colleges. The Major government boldly privatised the railways, but when it came to further education it made a large gift to charity.

The 1993 settlement ensured colleges remained non-profit making and gave their governing bodies long-term duties. Competition has forced them to be business-like but they avoided the follies of the UK’s millennial debt binge and retained a local presence in places poorly served by private companies.

The past five years in the UK have been so extraordinary it’s impossible to predict the next 20. If you work in a college, you face a tough present and an uncertain future. But I am confident the progress and experience of the recent past mean that we’re as well-placed as anyone for the next steps.

**Julian Gravatt, assistant chief executive Association of Colleges**

# The same old inspection story?

It could have been yesterday with the chief inspector for colleges telling a small gathering: “From here on, satisfactory will be taken to mean unsatisfactory.”

The chief inspector in question was Terry Melia and it was the mid-90s. He was telling principals they had been getting off lightly in inspection reports since incorporation and it was time to toughen up.

The words may change, but not the meaning. So, as Matthew Coffey, Ofsted director for learning and skills (pictured), carries out the latest changes to the inspection regime (where “satisfactory” is replaced by the warning that you “require improvement”) he makes no apologies. And with chief inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw having been strongly critical of colleges in his annual report last year, Coffey added: “We said the same thing, but the message may have been more softly spoken last year.”

“When you spend public money on inspection and the wake-up call doesn’t reach home, you purposefully ramp up the language. If some get a little defensive then so be it.”

The recent survey report Local Accountability and Autonomy in Colleges — on how well colleges were using new

freedoms and flexibilities to rethink priorities and develop their curriculum to meet local community needs — showed “only three out of 17 colleges visited had changed their curriculum in any way at all.”

At this point, comparison with immediate post-Incorporation years ends.

Coffey makes it clear his aim is to reach and change the hearts and minds of governors, to raise their game and get them to put more pressure on directors and senior managers.

“In colleges judged to require improvement, an individual HMI [not those who did the inspection] works with the institution to help them improve, to get to ‘good,’” he says.

The new Ofsted role under the remit of New Challenges; New Chances is to be “challenging and supporting,” says Coffey.

Intervention is not just aimed at the principal or senior teachers, but “where impact is best received”, he adds, “which is as likely to be the governors”.

Coupled with the intervention is a range of regional workshops and other activities designed to support specific groups — maybe governors — and get them to share good practice. The “national dashboard”

was devised to help boil data down to a single overview so governors could challenge directors and ask questions such as: “Why has the curriculum not changed to meet these needs?” and “Why have we seen no improvement around NEETs?”

## Many inspectors are seen to have little experience of colleges

Reactions to the changes are mixed. The 157 Group welcomed the emphasis on teaching and learning in the report and acknowledged the need to halt the increase in underperforming colleges. However, Marilyn Hawkins, chair of the 157 Group and principal of Barnet and Southgate College, said: “The rise in numbers of colleges judged inadequate is undoubtedly due in part to the fact that Ofsted inspection is focused on those deemed to be most at risk.”

Principals who spoke to *FE Week* varied

widely in their views. Many saw real strengths in the focus on teaching and learning, follow-up support for colleges requiring improvement and comprehensive presentation of reports and data. Some said lead inspectors were good, wrote clear and helpful reports and, overall, were probably “accurate, fair and robust”.

Equally, others saw weaknesses. One senior manager spoke of inspectors coming in with an attitude of “papal-like infallibility and arrogance”. Many had considerable concerns that Ofsted did not inspect most of what colleges do (such as HE) but presumed to give a grade for the whole college. Many inspectors are seen to have little experience of colleges.

But the overall view was that things were going in the right direction. Besides, things are unlikely to change anytime soon, as Coffey says: “The freedoms New Challenges; New Chances offer are welcomed and perhaps long overdue, but that has not gone hand-in-hand with the development of key figures such as governors.”

The unfinished business is planning for sustainability.

What we have now is an FE sector in which too many providers are too small to be viable, wholly dependent on public funding and heading for the financial buffers.

Wales is currently in the latter stages of planned rationalisation to create fewer, stronger colleges; perhaps a third of the original number.

The much-admired Australian TAFE institutes were created through multiple mergers of local colleges to create institutions big enough and strong enough to stand on their own feet, in creative consultation with state governments rather than being at the mercy, as John Hayes put it, of “impersonal instructions from a remote bureaucracy”.

A parallel suggests a need for 140 or so FE colleges and a reduced number of private and charitable providers, all working together.

The project for the next 20 years? We need to work towards a real, viable, autonomy rather than the echo of local authority control which remains at the heart of the incorporated colleges of today.

**David Sherlock, director of Beyond Standards**



# Colleges ‘still’ need to get in-line online

When Dick Moore (pictured) left Sheffield College to join a dotcom start-up company in the US he had the bright idea of putting his daughter through the GCSE English online course delivered by his old college.

“She got a GCSE A grade after one year of study,” he says. “And the crazy thing was that on returning to the UK her school made her sit GCSE English again.”

He tells the story to illustrate a point about the lack of joined-up thinking in the system. He’s not the only one. Other parents have been angered that their school demands a child resits — particularly if they are bright — because, otherwise, it doesn’t count towards the school’s performance league table figures.

For Moore, trustee of the Association for Learning Technology, whose career has spanned teaching IT, running MIS and supporting learning technology, “it illustrates the inertia in the system at every level.”

He adds: “There is some stunning work going on around the world and in the UK and no area needs it more than FE.”

FE was already making swift strides forward when Incorporation came along, says Moore, and there was every reason to expect a thoroughly coherent national system to emerge around Information and

Communications Technology (ICT).

But what emerged was piecemeal and still requires radically new thinking.

“As an educational technologist from the 1980s, I remain convinced of the potential that ICT has to transform the yield of education systems in the same way we have seen significant benefits delivered in health and manufacturing,” he says.

“In 1996-97, I led a consortium of South Yorkshire colleges [Sheffield College, Doncaster College, Northern College, Rotherham College of Art and Technology, Thomas Danby and Barnsley] and put

## The FE sector had to become computer-literate, including the sector managers

together a bid to connect them all to each other and to the Janet [formerly Joint Academic NETwork] system.”

Moore realised that to make e-enabled learning happen they needed three things:

- Infrastructure — to communicate
- Skills — to change the pedagogy
- Services — to deliver teaching and learning to the workplace and homes of students and employers

This was radical — before the Mosaic web browser or the WWW service on the internet had been built.

Moore moved to Sheffield College to work with the team that was developing a course to re-skill teachers in the “fabulous” Lettol Course, “which is still delivering 12 years on and in my opinion should have been compulsory for every new FE lecturer six years ago, or do we think the internet as an education medium is a passing fad?”

It is not only in teaching and learning that ICT should have brought more coherence to FE, he says.

The move from local authority funding to a national formula funding scheme and the Individual Student Record “was the pivotal moment when the FE sector had to become computer-literate, including the sector managers.”

The whole debate around “user requirement for management information in further education colleges” and managing resources in FE “pointed at a rationalist view of the world that could incrementally improve the quality of provision across the nation,” he says.



While the idea was very solid and showed great promise, the close coupling of the statistical return and financial return led to “an over-complex bureaucracy that had audit rules published after enrolment was closed, a system that steered the sector by looking in the rear view mirror on volumes that were 18 months out of date.”

Convergence of funding that followed put much pressure on colleges, which helped, but at some cost.

“Colleges spent quite significant sums of money buying systems staff to replace what had been a reasonably accurate statistical return,” says Moore.

“The fact that we don’t have a national web-based system for recording student funding still surprises me.”

# FE sector ‘outgrows’ inspection



**Ofsted is just the most recent of the bodies tasked with inspecting further education — but that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s the best says David Sherlock**

The English FE sector bears the imprint of its local authority past, when our national provision was unplanned and very uneven in quality — but although it remains unplanned, extreme variations in quality are a thing of the past.

The evening-out and general upgrading of quality was what the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) inspectorate and its successors, the Training Standards Council (TSC), the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and Ofsted, were introduced to achieve.

The person who did more than most to create robust FE colleges was Terry Melia,

FEFC’s first chief inspector.

He inveigled people like Janice Shiner and me to join as regional senior inspectors.

Our teams had a stiffening of former HMIs as well as former college principals and vice principals who had the experience essential for credible inspection.

And our associate inspectors worked directly for FEFC and, almost to a man and woman, were current FE staff.

A trawl through the FEFC archive held by the Institute of Education should convince anyone of the liberal and collaborative tone of its inspection framework and the very high standard of its college reports.

They might benefit inspection today. FEFC never attempted to sum up a large institution in a single grade. Melia understood that, like their counterparts in universities, some college departments will always be on the rise, some at the peak of their powers and some on the downward slope.

The trick was to identify which, so that would-be students could make an informed choice of course, not just college.

Equally, he was clear that inspection was a snapshot. Any idea that one could use it to make judgements about ‘failing teachers’ as did his contemporary, Chris Woodhead, in schools, or to gaze into the crystal ball and divine a college’s capacity to improve, were

inherently flawed.

As with colleges, so with the rest of the extended FE sector — quality was all over the place, but today private providers are just as well regarded as colleges. They perform just as well and are increasingly seen as playing a complementary role to colleges.

The success of the ALI was, like that of the FEFC inspectorate, due to our convincing providers that we were on their side, acknowledging that education and training were hard.

Nothing contributed more to making that message convincing than ALI’s Provider Development Unit which helped providers that had fared badly at inspection to make the first, difficult, steps towards recovery. So what remains to be done today? Not more inspection.

Just as the universities and polytechnics did before it, and on shorter timescales, the FE sector has outgrown inspection and should progress to serious self-assessment independently verified by a sector-owned peer review body.

Higher education’s QAA offers a convincing model of how it should be done, the government’s commitment to deregulation provides the right environment and the proposed Charter award carries the means to do it.

# College future built on chequered past

A surge of optimism over college buildings in 2007 came to a crashing halt just over a year later when it emerged the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) had over-committed and could not fund contracts already signed.

With the expectation of approving just £500m in grants, the proposals facing the LSC for first stage approval in March 2009 had already hit £2.7bn, with a further £3bn needed for 65 colleges submitting plans.

A report by Sir Andrew Foster concluded: “more modest proposals [had been turned] into wholesale upgrading of the entire college estate.”

One college bidding for £18m was urged to resubmit with an £80m new build proposal.

But, as one former senior Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) official told FE Week: “When it comes to an over-optimistic approach to estates management, FE has pedigree.”

When estates were first looked at on Incorporation 20 years ago, colleges underwent surveys to estimate costs of bringing colleges up to standard. FEFC estimated that £850m was needed.

But, set against local authority details

of work in progress and new commitments — and Treasury estimates that FE replacement costs would be £4.4bn — FEFC urged colleges to come up with more radical rebuilding plans.

Mick Fletcher (pictured), planning and funding specialist with the Policy Consortium, recalls: “There was a tendency for ‘visionary’ principals to build vast open plan areas without walls as colleges of the future, such as South East Essex and Stroud, which succeeding principals spent money turning back into classrooms.”

Each subsequent government policy change brought new building priorities — first health and safety, then replacing standard teaching facilities followed by demands to expand floor-space for a new student-centred focus on learning and so on, to the new national skills drive.

But one after another, magic solution building initiatives fell short.

In late 1996, private finance initiative

thinking proved a spanner in the works as FEFC funds were slashed from £126m to £59m, but private cash either failed to materialise or was too often inappropriately spent.

A formula to make the wealthiest colleges pay most through an Average Level of Funding formula was described by one finance director as “a complex and hair-raising disaster dreamed up by FEFC bean counters”.

The most successful period of rebuild and refurbishment came not from government initiative, but the property boom when college asset sales rose to record levels.

And so hopes for the latest £270m cash injection are welcomed with caution. Skills Minister Matthew Hancock said at the announcement: “With colleges trebling the amount of government money invested in capital projects we expect to see over £1.5bn in new college construction projects get off the ground in the next two years.”

Martin Doel, chief executive of the Association of Colleges, says: “This investment will allow colleges to continue to update their estates, helping them to deliver continuing high standards to their students, communities and industry partners.”

But he knows there are many imponderables such as the availability in colleges of matched funding and the capacity of private commerce to triple the investment.

This time, however, there is clear evidence of benefits that make this investment essential, he says. A major study for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills by Frontier (Europe) in December 2012 showed that every £1m capital investment brings 62 to 86 extra learners each year and that large investment reduces colleges’ dependency on other government money as they become more self-sufficient. Other benefits from spending on buildings include greater environmental sustainability and support for local economic regeneration. There is proven increased student satisfaction and better engagement with employers, the report concludes.

## Plans for the ideal estate

The state-of-the-art Gordon Banks Sports Centre helped win Newcastle-under-Lyme College (NULC) the West Midlands Sports College of the Year award while its new music technology centre has also won plaudits nationally.

The college building strategy is credited with helping more than double the number of 16 to 19-year-old students, from 1,500 to 3,700 (3,300 FTE), in a decade.

Karen Dobson, NULC principal, now has her eyes set on a nearby redundant fire station in the latest phase of a carefully thought-out expansion programme to meet a prediction of even further growth in student numbers.

For someone who comes over as so visionary, however, she is surprisingly cautious when talking estates strategy.

“Be careful what you aim for,” she says. “If all the lessons since Incorporation have taught us anything, it is to plan for where you ultimately want to be rather than what’s in the current funding pot.”

Four things favour her latest building proposal — healthy financial balances, new learner demands, the capacity to raise the necessary cash privately and confidence that, if necessary, she could make a viable bid under the government’s £270m capital money for FE announced in the Chancellor’s 2012 Autumn Statement.

But Dobson reckons the stop-go strategies, shifts of government policy and

inducements to spend regardless have not served the sector as well as they might.

With hindsight, NULC played its cards right, she says, concentrating on its strengths as a substantially 16 to 19 tertiary college with some adult and community learning — £18m versus £4m a year.

“In the late 1990s we built a new cheap and cheerful building for around £2m and shifted our A-level provision there from wooden potable classrooms. It was a bright building and nothing special, but it highlighted how poor the rest of the estate was,” explains Dobson.

And here, she points to the second key lesson since Incorporation.

“Take your staff with you — consult them at every stage,” she says, warning not to get carried away with an architect’s grand plans and in doing so forgetting the people who work and learn in the new environment.

“Staff were involved in considering everything — what things were given space, facilities, size and shape, things like that. “We tried to give them what they wanted and needed. As a result, because people were given clear explanations, we don’t get moans and groans if there’s disappointment.

“A lot of work was done to make sure the staff and managers were aware of the limitations and they knew why they could not get everything. Our architects were great and had lots of meetings with the curriculum teams.”



**Adult education has faced constant batterings in the past 20 years, says Alan Tuckett. But, like ground elder, it will continue to pop up through cracks in the system.**

“There’s no such thing as adult education – it is all further education,” the civil servant charged with the legislation that incorporated colleges once told me. To prove his point, he designed a programme to limit public funding to certified courses listed in an appendix (schedule 2) of the 1992 bill.

Faced with the end of public support for liberal education for adults, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, working with local government associations and the Women’s Institute (WI), organised a campaign to change the bill. Around 400,000 people signed a petition in three weeks and 9,000 WI branches mobilised members to write to MPs.

# Bruised but never battered

Within six weeks the policy was ‘clarified’ — national funding for courses of national priority would go through the new Further Education Funding Council (FEFC); other uncertified classes could be funded by local authorities. FEFC funding expanded, local government was cash-strapped — with the result that French for pleasure classes became level one to qualify for national funding. Local adult services became mini FE providers riding the expansion of the sector — and proving the civil servant’s point. A new industry emerged, offering credit to community-based courses, and provision where learners might negotiate the curriculum reduced in number.

However, in the mid 1990s, finance ministers of countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development became intensely interested in lifelong learning as a means to secure economic advantage, and successive Conservative and Labour governments sought to encourage outreach and participation to people turned off by learning the first time round.

The Kennedy, Tomlinson and Moser reports, backed by then Education Secretary David Blunkett’s faith in the holistic benefits of adult learning, helped the sector to identify, reach and provide successfully for groups of adults under-represented in FE. The high water mark of public policy for adult learning was reached with the remit

letter given to the new Learning and Skills Council (LSC) that took over from the FEFC and the training and enterprise councils in 2002.

But the business people charged with overseeing the LSC had radically different priorities; Blunkett moved off to the Home Office and, before long, utilitarianism became the order of the day as year after year we were exhorted, through yet another

**Then Education Secretary David Blunkett’s faith in the holistic benefits of adult learning, helped the sector**

skills strategy, to shape up and get qualified. Meanwhile FE funding continued to expand and post-25 funding stalled and shrank — one million adult learners disappeared from publicly-funded provision in three or four years. In came the deadweight funding of the Train to Gain programme where, among other things, the LSC paid the Army for

basic skills teaching it was already doing in order to hit targets. Still, Train to Gain did reach people in work in their 40s and 50s.

Late in the decade John Denham, the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, put energy — though little cash — into a renovated community learning policy that sought to celebrate and encourage learning outside formal provision, in universities of the third age, libraries, museums, reading groups and voluntary associations.

But the bankers’ excesses and the onset of the recession scuppered any hope of a real renaissance and inhibited John Hayes, the incoming Tory Skills Minister, from financially backing his and Business Secretary Vince Cable’s vision for learning for its own sake.

So, here we are, with post-25 numbers leaking from colleges, a bleak spending round in prospect, and reasons to be cheerful in short supply. Yet adult education, like ground elder is resilient, and pops up through the cracks in the system, whatever the planners may want.

**Alan Tuckett, president of the International Council for Adult Education, former chief executive of NIACE and a visiting professor in lifelong learning at Nottingham and Leicester universities**

# Keeping our eyes on the prize



**What did Incorporation do for sixth-form colleges? Well, says David Igoe, few principals and governing bodies would choose to go back to local authority control**

In 1992, sixth-form colleges came under Schools regulations and were funded and administered through the local authority. Incorporation in 1993 came, therefore, as both a surprise and a shock, not least to find ourselves thrust into the new world of FE, jostling and competing

with much larger general FE colleges and their tertiary cousins.

We liked the sound of the freedom and autonomy that came with Incorporation, with new opportunities to expand into the adult market, the ability to borrow and control capital expenditure and manage our own estates.

**The average sixth-form college had around 800 students in 1993; today it has 1,650 and rising**

We were less keen on the 5 per cent annual efficiency requirement in the early years, coupled with convergence to the FE mean level of funding. This was harsh for many sixth-form colleges that did not have the economies of scale afforded to

general FE and financial collapse reduced our number from 126 at Incorporation to 100 by 2000, with most lost to merger with larger, general FE colleges.

Despite the setbacks, most sixth-form colleges prospered and grew through the 1990s. Cutbacks did not affect quality; most colleges ‘resolved’ their financial position by increasing class size and rationalising senior management teams. Paradoxically, performance outcomes rose in inverse proportion to increases in class size that by 2000 were an average of 19 compared with 11 at Incorporation. The greatest change was in size of institution. The average sixth-form college had around 800 students in 1993; today it has 1,650 and rising.

But sixth-form colleges have never felt entirely at home in the FE sector. This was recognised by Andrew Foster who singled us out in his influential 2005 report into the future of FE. He recommended we be recognised for outstanding quality and protected from further merger. This suggestion found some substance in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act of 2009 that created a new ‘designated’ legal entity for sixth-

form colleges. It also placed them under the stewardship of the Department for Education — unlike the rest of FE, which remained with the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills.

So what did Incorporation do for us? The 94 remaining sixth-form colleges have emerged as a strong, confident sector with an impressive track record of performance and operational management. We still have financial worries and have been hit hard in the current round of cuts and efficiency requirements; but we’ve been through this before.

Incorporation gives us the means to manage our own destiny, a prize we would not want to give up. Few sixth-form college principals and governing bodies would choose to go back to local authority control. We are the true pathfinders for a model of education based on self-managing, autonomous institutions that is now being promoted as the model for all progressive institutions — they happen to be called academies and free schools.

**David Igoe, chief executive, Sixth Form Colleges Association**

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