



Curriculum in FE Colleges over time: Illustrations of change and continuity

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Introduction

In a world where the volume of knowledge and scientific instruction is expanding so rapidly no nation can afford to rely solely on a ten year (or even an eleven year) period of education for the vast majority and an extension of a further few years for a select minority. Opportunities must be made increasingly available for all to keep their knowledge up-to-date and to improve their skills and techniques. Nor is it less vital, where economic and social conditions are changing so rapidly, to assist the rising generation to re-interpret in the light of altered circumstances those moral and intellectual values upon which our civilisation is based and thus help them to develop their various aptitudes and capacities to the full.

(Derbyshire Scheme for Further Education, 1949, Preface).

Since they began to take shape as institutions in the late 19th century, colleges of further education (FE)¹ in England have continued to evolve in response to social, economic, and political change (Bailey and Unwin 2014). Although they continue to vary in size, structure, and character, they share the challenge of designing teaching and learning from Entry Level upwards that will attract and meet the needs of learners from adolescents to pensioners with a wide range of capabilities, prior educational experience and attainment, and life experience. Colleges compete with other further education and training providers for 16-18 year-olds and adults and have to navigate the fluctuating requirements of local communities, employers, governments, funding agencies, inspectors, and qualification awarding bodies. Due to their breadth of activity, FE colleges continue to act as 'anchor institutions' within their localities and regions (Senior and Barnes 2003).

As the above quotation reminds us, educational institutions are affected by and contribute to national and global meta concerns about the human condition.² At the March meeting of the Derby Branch of the Association of Teachers in Technical Institutions (ATTI) in

1960, members prepared a resolution to be sent to the national ATTI conference asking teachers 'throughout the world to urge their governments to reach agreement' to remove the threat of nuclear war.³ Today, FE colleges are responding to calls for the 'greening' and 'decolonisation of the curriculum', as well as the long-standing challenges to develop so-called key skills, service employer needs, and adopt co-production approaches to involve learners in the design of the curriculum (see inter alia, Atkins 2022; Avis, Orr, Papier and Warmington 2017; Duckworth and Smith 2019; ETF 2022a and 2022b).

The principles that underpin a college's curriculum approach have always been influenced by a wide range of actors and forces both within and beyond a college's walls. Hence, colleges continue to be the servant of many masters, though the balance of power between them and their level of influence shifts over time (Huddleston and Branch-Haddow, 2022). There is a strong and growing body of multi-disciplinary research on FE colleges charting the key periods of their development.⁴ It documents how colleges have soaked up innumerable waves of policy and regulatory

¹ This paper covers the work of what are currently known as General FE Colleges in England.

² Quotation taken from the *Derbyshire Scheme for Further Education*, 1949. (Derbyshire Records Office, Matlock). After the 1944 Education Act had made the provision of 'adequate' facilities for FE a duty of Local Authorities, the Ministry of Education asked them to produce their plans (see Bailey and Unwin 2014 for a discussion).

³ Minutes of the ATTI Derby Branch. (Derbyshire Records Office, Matlock).

⁴ As well as the Edge Foundation's own research, other initiatives include, for example, the AoC and NCFE's collaboration 'Research Further' <https://www.aoc.co.uk/research-unit/research-further>

interference to an extent that their very resilience and adaptability has often been cited as both key to their survival as well as a barrier to their desire to have the autonomy they need to fulfil their potential (Orr 2020).

For this 'stimulus' paper, we have looked within the college walls (past and present) to find illustrations of how the FE curriculum has been presented and organised at different periods. By selecting examples from archive material such as copies of prospectuses and syllabuses, papers of academic boards and student unions, and articles in local newspapers, we hope to shed some light on the shifts in curricular activity and, hence, contribute to the wider debate about the role of FE today. We also hope the approach might encourage some readers to explore (and perhaps help save!) their own institutional archives. As the paper does not provide a detailed linear history or standard critique of the FE curriculum, we have provided references for readers

wanting to pursue ideas raised here in more depth as well as those we have not been able to cover.

The paper is structured around three themes covering the key spheres of influence that have been active in shaping curricula in colleges since they emerged:

- Meeting individual and employer demand
- State-led Qualifications and 'Reform'
- Balancing occupational specialisation with general education

The paper is divided into five further sections. The next section briefly discusses the concept of 'curriculum' in the FE context, followed by three sections covering the 'spheres of influence' listed above and a final section providing concluding comments.

What do we mean by 'curriculum' in the FE context?

...curriculum must be understood broadly so that it means more than the syllabus – the often brief accounts of the 'content' to be covered. It embraces the overarching aims and values as well, the ways learning is organised, the methods adopted and the links between teaching and assessment. (Pring 1997, p125)

Some see diversity of activities as a strength but it leaves others with the impression that FE colleges lack clear themes that interested partners can identify with. Many potential champions in business and government find it difficult to relate to an FE college network with such a wide portfolio of activities.

Use of the term 'curriculum' as conceptualised in the above quotation may seem strange in an age when the focus of attention in both policy and practice seems to be predominantly on qualifications and assessment specifications. The term is masked in everyday FE parlance by euphemisms such as 'the offer', 'provision', 'entitlement', or simply 'courses' and 'subjects'. Yet it is central to college life.

Fast forward fifteen years and the Independent Commission on the College of the Future (2020, p.15) declared that 'Colleges are poorly understood and their potential as public and economic assets is greatly underutilised'.

In 1994, the annual report of the Chief Inspector of the Further Education Funding Council⁵ noted that, "There is no single further education curriculum, but further education does have curricular traditions" (FEFC 1994, p.54). Those traditions might be categorized as general education, vocational and technical education and training, adult education, higher education, and special educational needs. This curricular range has baffled education bureaucrats, policymakers, and journalists since the state started to take an active interest in FE after the establishment of the Board of Education in 1902. Although the Board agreed, in 1912, to fund a wide range of provision (termed 'classes') including basic literacy and numeracy, general and technical education, leisure courses, and subjects for individuals studying for London University external degrees, it expressed its frustration with what it called the 'mere congeries of classes without system or cohesion' (cited in Bailey and Unwin 2014). Almost a hundred years later, the Foster Review (2005, p.13) declared that:

Government attempts to tidy up or indeed control what colleges provide are continuing today through two related policy interventions. First, government funding has been withdrawn from around 5,000 vocational qualifications deemed to be of 'low quality' and/or with low enrolments and, from August 2024, funding for qualifications for 16-19 year-olds including popular and long-standing BTEC Applied General Qualifications (Level 3) that overlap with the new 'T Levels' will also be withdrawn⁶. This flows from the recommendations made in the 2011 Review of Vocational Education (known as the Wolf Report), commissioned by the then Secretary of State for Education, Michal Gove, and led by Professor Alison Wolf⁷.

Critical reaction to these policies has been and continues to be intense. At the end of March 2023, the DfE announced it was reinstating approval for 28 Level 3 qualifications, but a month later in the final report of its inquiry into the future of post-16 qualifications, the House of Commons Education Committee called for the DfE to "place a moratorium on defunding Applied General Qualifications", arguing that they "should only be withdrawn as and when there is a robust evidence base proving that T Levels are demonstrably more effective

⁵ For timelines showing the history of the organisations involved in the funding and governance of FE colleges see the Edge website: <https://www.edge.co.uk/research/Learning-from-the-past/>

⁶ [lap_inc_Health_and_Science.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180504/DFE-00031-2011.pdf)

⁷ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180504/DFE-00031-2011.pdf

in preparing students for progression, meeting industry needs and promoting social mobility" (p.35).⁸ Meanwhile, in April 2023, the DfE announced that its intended 'reforms' to Level 2 qualifications would now be phased over a four-year period (see Kobayashi and Warner 2022 for a study of the value of qualifications at Level 2 and below including as stepping stones to further education and training for adults).

Second, and echoing the reference to employers in the previous paragraph, *The Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022* stipulated that regional Employer Representative Bodies (ERBs)⁹ would be established to lead the development of three-year Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) which would then be submitted to the Secretary of State for Education for approval. In most regions, chambers of commerce have been designated as ERBs, with some exceptions including, for example, in the North East region where one of the ERBs is the North East Automotive Alliance. ERBs are required to work with all organisations providing government-funded post-16 technical education and training. The DfE's most recent statutory guidance explains that the role of an LSIP is to "set out a clear articulation of employers' skills needs and the priority changes required in a local area to help ensure post-16 technical education and skills provision is more responsive and flexible in meeting local labour market skills needs" (DfE 2022, p.7)¹⁰. It also states that, because they are 'employer-led', LSIPs will be "uniquely placed to shine a spotlight on the actual skills employers most need in the workplace but are struggling to find locally" (ibid, p.6).

Colleges will be experiencing a distinct whiff of 'déjà vu' given previous attempts to make qualification and curriculum development more broadly 'employer-led' (Huddleston 2021; Keep 2020 and 2006; Huddleston and Laczik, 2018; Unwin 2004; Raggatt and Williams 1999). As many colleges know, not all employers are willing to play their part in such initiatives or to invest in training. There is a glimmer of recognition of this in the DfE's (2022, p.11) guidance on LSIPs in a section on the need for dialogue with employers to encourage them to get more involved to ensure they are "fully utilising the provision already available" and to "support

large employers to make greater use of their levy and for small and medium sized employers to take on apprentices". Sir Willis Jackson, Director of Research and Education at the Metropolitan-Vickers Electrical Company used somewhat stronger language in a 1958 article calling for employers to reduce their reliance on poaching trained staff and for an expansion of further education for young workers:

No industrial firm, large or small, can afford to be without personnel skilled in the properties and uses of materials and in the tools and techniques of manufacture. Such personnel are the lifeblood of industry; yet in a large number of firms the need for broad training in these fundamental matters is scarcely recognised, and reliance is placed on processes, techniques and designs which, though they may have served adequately in the past, are unlikely to suffice in the highly industrialised, and increasingly competitive, world of the future (Jackson, 1958, p.10).

Ofsted, Underfunding and the FE Curriculum

As LSIPs are developed, it will be interesting to see to what extent they align with the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills' (Ofsted) definition of curriculum. In its current inspection handbook for colleges and other further education providers, Ofsted uses the term 'curriculum' 111 times and provides this definition:

The curriculum sets out the aims of a programme of education and training. It also sets out the structure for those aims to be implemented, including the knowledge, skills and behaviours to be gained at each stage. It enables the evaluation of learners' knowledge and understanding against those expectations...We will judge providers taking *radically different approaches to the curriculum* fairly. We recognise the importance of *providers' autonomy* to choose their own curriculum approaches. (Ofsted 2022, paras 232 and 233, our emphasis).

⁸ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/39333/documents/193104/default/>

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-employer-representative-bodies/notice-of-designated-employer-representative-bodies>

¹⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1111501/Local_skills_improvement_plans_-_statutory_guidance_Oct_2022.pdf

The handbook goes on to state that:

A well-constructed, well-taught curriculum will lead to learners learning more and so achieving good results. There need be no conflict between teaching a *broad, rich curriculum* and achieving success in examinations and tests or assessments (para 243, our emphasis).

And in paragraph 261, there is a further reference to curriculum breadth:

The curriculum should support learners to develop their knowledge and skills beyond the purely academic, technical or vocational. This judgement evaluates the provider's intent to provide for the *personal development of learners*, and the quality of the way in which it does this (our emphasis).

Whilst readers might want to debate the meaning of the curious phrase 'purely academic, technical or vocational', Ofsted would appear to both support and actively encourage a plurality of approaches in the creation of a 'broad, rich curriculum'. However, there is no reference in the handbook to the critical role of funding in achieving this noble aim. This contrasts with the many references to funding in the DfE's (2023, p.14) 108-page guide to what it terms 'integrated curriculum and financial planning'. Here, the complexity, limitations, and uncertainty of FE funding are presented as key enabling devices that need to be grasped by colleges:

The *uncertainty and intricacy* of further education funding, combined with its use as a central policy enabler, adds a complexity to its use that might not be the case in schools, universities, and training organisations with a simpler funding profile. It is this complexity that demands a more systematic approach to curriculum planning, whilst *the very same complexity is what protects colleges from the potential impacts of changes in funding policy*, the risks associated with not satisfying funding compliance, and the responsive nature of many project-based opportunities. Whilst *the sector is renowned for its ability to respond and flex its limited resource* to meet the opportunities it is presented with, and the challenges associated with relatively

short-term planning cycles involved in state funding methodologies, what undermines many organisations' ability to predict and forecast effectively is the extent to which planning facilitates informed decision making (*our emphasis*).

Yet, in its 2021 report on the financial sustainability of colleges in England, the National Audit Office (NAO) concluded that continued under-funding was affecting the curriculum:

Overall, the financial health of the college sector remains fragile. Ofsted inspection ratings suggest that colleges are generally maintaining educational quality, but other evidence shows that financial pressures are affecting wider aspects of provision such as the *breadth of the curriculum* and levels of student support (NAO 2021, p.12. our emphasis; see also IFS 2022).

The report provided examples of courses/subjects being dropped, including modern languages, science, technology, engineering, and maths as well as "significantly decreased enrichment activities for students" (ibid, p.32). Three decades earlier, the Audit Commission (the NAO's predecessor) had castigated FE in its landmark report, *Obtaining Better Value From FE* (Audit Commission, 1985), citing a range of problems, including high drop-out rates, non-viable classes, and poor marketing. Commentators have argued that this heralded the shift in FE to the 'managerialist' and 'performance culture' of today, or as Holloway (1999, p.237) put it, a "move away from the public service model towards a greater market orientation".

As we were writing this paper, the prospects for financial stability did not look promising as the Chancellor of the Exchequer allocated no new funding for FE colleges in his 2023 Spring Budget.¹¹ This collision between the demands on FE and its less than optimum place in the public funding hierarchy is echoed in documents dating back to the emergence of colleges. In 1964, the Committee on Technical College Resources was appointed by the National Advisory Council on Education for Industry and Commerce (NACEIC) "to suggest ways of making the most effective use of the resources available and expected to become available in technical and other colleges of further education" (NACEIC 1964,

¹¹ <https://www.aoc.co.uk/news-campaigns-parliament/aoc-newsroom/colleges-overlooked-by-chancellor-in-budget>

p.4). Two years later, it reported the increasing pressures on colleges in the light of the then Labour government's National Plan for economic growth and warned that:

Even, however, on an optimistic view of the growth in the economy it would be unrealistic to expect that in competition with other urgent claims (including not only other branches of the education service but housing, the hospitals and the social services generally) the resources which can be made available for further education will be fully equal to the needs" (ibid, p.5).

Predating the DfE's curriculum guide by nearly 30 years, an FE curriculum manager interviewed in 1996, three years after incorporation and the establishment of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), explained: "The whole process of managing an educational institution providing breadth of opportunity, is finding a means of *measuring incoming funding against internal strategy*" (Lumby 1996, p.336, our emphasis; see also Simkins and Lumby 2002; Thompson and Wolstencroft 2015). As well as the FEFC, the manager would also be dealing with the impact on their college of the local Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), one of 82 TECs covering England and Wales set up in 1991 to plan and fund work-based training for young people and adults (Felstead and Unwin 2001). By 2001, that same manager would witness the replacement of the FEFC and the TECs by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). And today's manager will be contemplating the implications of the reclassification of colleges as public sector institutions, reversing their incorporation in 1993. As Simkins and Lumby (2002) documented twenty years ago, the impact of financially-driven curriculum planning, with its focus on student retention and individualisation results in an increase in the number and profile of administrative staff.

Despite Ofsted's reference to provider autonomy, control of the curriculum (whether in schools, colleges, or adult education institutions) has always been a political issue, chiefly because education and training policy has been used as a means to address a range of social and economic policy goals (Tomlinson 2005). Today, these are exemplified not just in the broad policy direction for FE, but specifically within the general funding allocations, the range of qualifications approved for funding on Ofqual's Register of Regulated Qualifications (RRQ), local and regional agendas, inspection, and

performance management. These tensions are more clearly evident and experienced within the FE environment than within schools (where the focus is on the National Curriculum) or universities which have legally enforceable curricular freedom.

This begs the question as to how much freedom and discretion FE college staff have in shaping the curriculum. Stanton et.al. (2015, p.86) argue that this is limited because policymakers are particularly prone to interfere in FE (see also Keep 2006). Lumby (1996, p.334) reminds us, however, that policy enactment is very different from policy espousal: "Policy decisions are enacted in an environment which is swept by currents of individual and organisational circumstance and belief, so that the consequences may be very different from those anticipated and desired". Despite their many shared characteristics, it is striking how much FE colleges differ – walk through the doors of a sample of institutions and you experience the difference in terms of atmosphere.

Meeting individual and employer demand

FE colleges grew mainly in response to two interrelated demands: a) individual citizens' dual desire to extend and broaden their education and gain credentials to improve their life chances; and b) employers (and/or industrial and commercial associations) seeking to recruit skilled labour and/or upskill their existing workforces in response to technological and scientific advancement. The first demand has always been the more powerful. In its annual report for 1949, the Ministry of Education noted that 'Planning for further education must always be provisional, since in the last resort everything depends on the *student's* willingness to attend' (Ministry of Education 1950, p. 27, our emphasis). Forty years later, in a speech to the annual conference of the Association of Colleges of Further and Higher Education in 1989, the then Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker (using the language of the market in stark contrast to the Ministry), said: "Every autumn, in fact all through the year, you find yourselves changing the mix of courses, adapting to whatever *customers* come through your doors" (Baker, 1989, p. 8, our emphasis).

Trying to gain credentials in the 19th and early 20th century was hard going for two key reasons. First, due to the slow emergence of a national elementary education system, many people lacked the basic education needed to cope with the theoretical level of instruction and assessment (Bailey, 2001; Green 2013), and second, the well-documented *laissez-faire* attitude of successive British governments to both industrialisation and technical education meant workforce development, including for apprentices, was left to employers. This comment from a paper given at the Liverpool Engineering Society in 1868 captures the struggles individuals faced:

Hitherto our workmen (sic) have been left to do for themselves...although engaged from 6am to 6pm at their daily work, they manage to attend evening classes where these are available, and where they are not, they tread their way along, picking up what scraps of information they can find in the nearest lending library and by dint

of their British pluck...get sufficient knowledge to fit them for foremen and managers (cited in Roderick and Stephens 1982, p.23).

Today, many adults seeking education and training opportunities also face considerable barriers exacerbated by the underfunding of FE colleges and adult community learning as well as the current rise in the cost of living.¹²

One example of an early local attempt to expand educational opportunities for adolescents was the foundation of The People's College, Nottingham, in 1846 funded by a local resident, George Gill, and other public subscriptions. The aim was to emulate the kind of education offered by lower grade secondary schools at a moderate price and serve both the city and surrounding villages. The curriculum offered boys instruction in "the three Rs and singing, with object lessons, natural history, physiology, social economy, history, natural philosophy, mathematics, Latin and French", whilst girls (admitted from 1850) were offered "a sound English education and were taught plain needlework".¹³ By 1855, the payment of a government grant enabled the College to provide a range of evening classes for those already in employment, including "the three Rs, English grammar, algebra, book-keeping, French, German and singing". This curriculum expanded to include subjects such as metallurgy, chemistry, physics, astronomy, and machine drawing. During the 19th century, the college was classified as an Evening Continuation School (1896), and a Commercial and Technical Centre and Junior Technical School (1907) and was renamed as the People's College of Further Education in 1949. Following the reorganisation of FE in Nottingham in the early 2000s, the college closed in 2006.

Perhaps the most inspiring statement on individual demand for learning can be found in the Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee's final 1919 report written in the aftermath of the first world. The report proposed, as Holford et.al. (2019, p.127) explain, "a strong political case for a broad – lifelong and lifewide –

¹² For a detailed analysis, see Wright, J. and Corney, M. (eds) *Learning in the Cold. The Cost of Living Crisis in Post-16 Education and Skills*. https://campaign-for-learning.org.uk/common/Uploaded%20files/Policy/CFL_Learning_in_the_Cold%20-Cost-of-Living-Report.pdf

¹³ The source for quotations and information in this paragraph is Margaret Carter's (1975) *A history of People's College of Further Education*. See: <http://www.peoplescollegeoldboys.co.uk/the-history-of-the-school/51-the-history-of-peoples-college-school.html>

adult education curriculum as essential for democratic citizenship". It argued:

The motive which impels men and women to seek education is *partly the wish for fuller personal development*. It arises from the desire for knowledge, for self-expression, for the satisfaction of intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual needs, and for a fuller life. It is based upon a claim for the recognition of human personality. This desire is not confined to any class of society, but is to be found amongst people of every social grade...The motive is also *partly social*. Indeed, so far as the workers are concerned, it is, we think, this social purpose which principally inspires the desire for education. They demand opportunities for education in the hope that the power which it brings will enable them to understand and help in the solution of the common problems of human society. (Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee, 1919, p. 5, as cited in Holford et.al, 2019)

The report called for an expansion in part-time adult education provided by universities ('extra-mural classes') and for local education authorities to regard non-vocational adult education, including leisure and recreational classes, as integral to their services. Many FE colleges provided a wide range of vocational and general education part-time day and evening classes for adults including, for example, courses designed by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) for aspirant union officials. In 1973, the former Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, was appointed as a Lecturer in Industrial Relations and Politics at the then Barnsley College of Technology.

Individuals who attended evening classes provided by a variety of institutions could sit for external examinations leading to certificates administered by local and regional examination boards such as the Northern Council for Further Education established in 1848 (now called NCFE) and, from the 1860s onwards, in science and art subjects set and marked by the government's Department of Science and Art in South Kensington, London. By the late 19th century, the Livery Companies had lost much of the power they had established from the medieval period as guilds to control their respective trades and crafts including the organisation of apprenticeships, but they had become very wealthy (Bailey 1987). In 1875, the then prime minister, William Gladstone, questioned whether the Livery Companies were using enough of

their reserves to support the training of the apprentices and artisans they represented. In response, the City of London and 16 Livery Companies established the City and Guilds of London Institute (CGLI) which took over the technical examinations offered by the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), which had introduced examinations for artisans in 1856, and opened the Finsbury Technical College in 1883 (see Howes 2020 for a history of the RSA; Binfield and Hey 1997 for a history of the Company of Cutlers in Sheffield; and Roach 1971 for a history of public examinations in England). In 1889, the *Technical Instruction Act* enabled County Councils and County Borough Councils to levy a rate to fund the further expansion of technical education instruction.

Colleges could also offer their own qualifications, a practice that continues today (see for example Westminster Kingsway College's Grand Escoffier Diploma) along with bespoke programmes for employers on a full-cost basis. A college business development manager told us: "*Yes, we would offer even if no quals – i.e. you have a problem, I build you a solution – you pay for it.*"

Despite the demand from individuals, classes for adults were severely affected following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act's requirement that colleges should only receive funding for courses that were defined as vocational or work-related and which led to a recognised qualification. For anything else, students would be required to pay fees, hence students became 'customers'. The move was met with widespread opposition with critics pointing out that many non-vocational courses helped to develop a range of skills useful for employment as well as being stepping stones for adults returning to formal learning. As is often the case in FE, individual teachers and curriculum managers deployed their creative skills to circumvent the new rules – flower-arranging became floristry (Unwin 1999) – but the policy set in train a downward spiral of adult education participation that has yet to recover.

Employer demand and initiatives

Demand from employers has always taken different forms. Individual employers (of all types and sizes) as well as employer associations continue to seek ways to increase their workforce capacity in response to technological and product market change. They have also contributed funds to the creation of sector-based schools and colleges including, for example the Boot and Shoe School in Rushden, Northamptonshire,

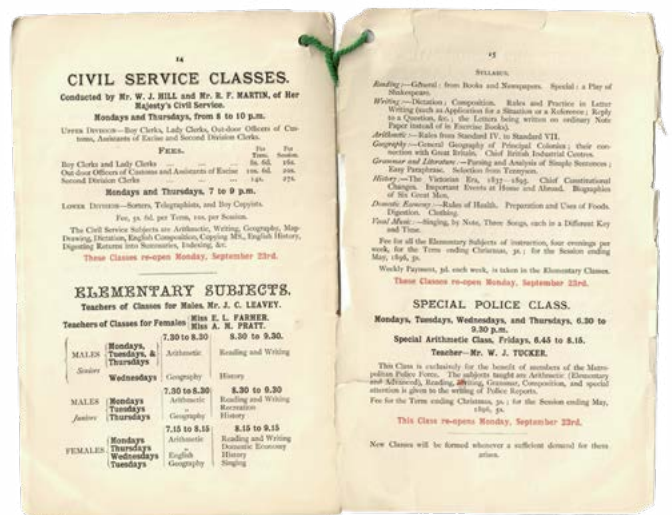
a county¹⁴ with a long history in the footwear industry. The school was opened in October 1928, by Lord Eustace Percy, M.P., President of the Board of Education. The Rushden and District Boot Manufacturer's Association contributed towards the overall costs along with other gifts (such as machinery and materials) and loans from the industry to provide training for those employed in local shoe factories. By 1930 the standard of work had improved "and finished shoes were easily saleable". Public talks and exhibitions of work were also held. In 1933, girls were admitted to the school and the curriculum was broadened through the inclusion of trade union studies and the installation of a science laboratory.

The school became the Rushden Technical College and, in 1973, it merged with the then Wellingborough Technical College. From the 1960s onwards, the industry underwent major changes as the manufacture of cheaper shoes and boots moved overseas, but there are still some companies making high end footwear. The British Footwear Association (founded in 1898) recently contributed to the development of a Level 2 apprenticeship in Footwear Manufacture with Northampton College. The Rushden example illustrates how the economic viability of specific industries has and continues to affect the UK's education and training landscape and the FE curriculum.

Another and longer lasting example of employer initiative and engagement is provided by the Westminster School of Hospitality and Culinary Arts which opened in London in 1910. The initiative was triggered by two key concerns: a) the demand for highly trained chefs and hospitality managers in the capital's growing hotel and restaurant sector; and b) the lack of provision of catering education for boys (cookery classes for girls were introduced in some schools in 1882) and the generally poor standard of apprenticeship training in the industry. In 1906, the Universal Cookery and Food Association (whose members included employers, leading names in the industry including Auguste Escoffier, the French Chef de Cuisine at the Savoy Hotel, and Westminster Member of Parliament, William Burdett-Coutts) opened its own cookery school in Vauxhall Bridge Road. The increasing demand for places led to the Association negotiating with the education department of the London County Council (LCC) to take over responsibility for the school and in 1910 it became part of the existing Westminster

Technical Institute. In a letter to the Association agreeing that the school could open in September 1910, the LCC stipulated that it should provide a three-year programme for male apprentices aged 14-16 as well as courses for people already in employment seeking credentials¹⁵.

Burdett-Coutts' wife, Angela, Baroness Burdett-Coutts, a leading social reformer and philanthropist, had founded the Westminster Technical Institute in 1894. As the extract from the Institute's prospectus for 1895-1896 shows, it offered a range of courses including: "special trade, technical, science, art, commercial and general" classes in connection with the CGLI, the Education Department, the London County Council and the Society of Arts; elementary education for men and women; part-time evening classes for Civil Service occupations such as 'Boy Clerks and Lady Clerks' and 'Out-door officers of Customs'; and elementary and advanced level general education for officers of the Metropolitan Police Force.¹⁶ This provides an interesting early example of partnership between a range of stakeholders who remain involved in FE today – employers, providers, examining boards and local government.



Two notable further examples of employer engagement in the development of FE institutions and curricula are rooted in the construction industry. The first is the Building Crafts College in London which began existence as the Trades Training School in 1893 established by the Worshipful Company of Carpenters in collaboration with six City Livery Companies representing: Joiners and

¹⁴ Other notable areas associated with a history of shoe making are Leicester and Rossendale in Lancashire.

¹⁵ Source: Westminster Kingsway College has a large archive of documents, photographs and other resources which chart the history of developments in education and training in the hospitality and catering sectors.

¹⁶ This prospectus can be found in the Westminster Kingsway College archive.



Source: Westminster Kingsway College archive

Ceilers, Wheelwrights, Plaisterers¹⁷, Painter-Stainers, Tyllers and Bricklayers, and Plumbers (see Marchand 2022 for a detailed history). In 1888, its first director, Banister Fletcher, Professor of Architecture at Kings' College London, had led the development of Carpentry and Joinery technical examinations for individuals hoping to progress in the building trades. The theory component of the examinations formed the basis of later textbooks and 11 of the first graduates formed the British Institute of Certified Carpenters (since 1976 known as the Institute of Carpenters). The School offered evening classes in a range of building-related trades including: joinery, wheelwrighting, masonry, stone carving, brickwork and tiling, plasterwork, painting and plumbing. It survived through two world wars and in 1948 changed its name to the Building Crafts Training School and in 1993 to the Building Crafts College.

The Leeds College of Building traces its origins back to four previous institutions: the Leeds Mechanics Institute, founded in 1824, then renamed the Leeds School of Science, which in turn became the Leeds Institute of Building in 1868 and the Leeds College of Technology, established in 1908, with its headquarters in the same building. Further change followed a review of construction training in the city after the second world war. In 1960, the Branch College of Building was established, coinciding in 1961 with the introduction of the Building Crafts Schemes. In 1970 the college was renamed the Leeds College of Building.¹⁸

In the first half of the 20th century, the expansion and funding of a college's curriculum often depended on the entrepreneurship of individual principals supported by very small numbers of largely part-time staff (Thoms 1979). As today's college principals know, employer

¹⁷ As in the spelling of the day.

¹⁸ Adapted from: <https://secretlibraryleeds.net/2017/11/15/explore-your-archive-leeds-college-of-building/>

engagement takes considerable time and involves building relationships with individuals, sector-level bodies, and professional associations. In his report to the Local Education Authority on the academic year 1972-73, the principal of Oldham College of Technology reported on how the college was responding to developments in the television and radio industry and the impact this was having on the curriculum of the Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering:

During the session the specialised Cable Television Course was offered with the full support of the Society of Relay Engineers and the Society of Cable Television Engineers. As far as can be ascertained, this was the first course in this field in the country: 111 students attended, many from distant areas. The experience gained from this pilot experiment has proved valuable in setting up future courses of a similar type. Special equipment was introduced and the first steps have been taken to write this topic into existing syllabuses of appropriate courses. Work was commenced converting Room 8 into a Lecture/Demonstration Laboratory with audio-visual aids which include c.c.t.v. and video-tape facilities. These facilities are particularly important for advanced Radio and Television work and for specialist courses where audio-visual facilities are required.⁴⁹

In an extract from the same report (in a section on the Department of Business and General Studies), we see how maintaining relationships with individual employers was critical to the stability of a college's curriculum. The extract also reveals how colleges at that time faced the pressure of local competition and the impact of LEA policies (in this case from neighbouring Manchester which controlled Moston College):

There was a dramatic increase in the numbers enrolled for day-release due to the decision of Hawker Siddeley Aviation Ltd to close down their secretarial training centre at Chadderton and to send all their trainees to this Department in spite of the proximity of Moston College who offer the same facilities. The fact that Manchester Education Committee is willing to waive fees for those day-release students under 18 years of age may jeopardise this arrangement in the future.

In the early 1980s, developments in robotics offered a new opportunity for curriculum innovation. In 1983, Geoff Cornell and Bill Hoy (respectively Head of Department and Lecturer in the Department of Electrical Engineering, Mathematics and Computing at Farnborough College of Technology) wrote an article about how their college was responding with short courses for "senior technicians and craftsmen, and the development of student projects to build and test both the hardware and software of robotic devices" and new units for inclusion in existing accredited programmes (Cornell and Hoy 1983, p.6). They note, however, that "Discussions with other colleges show that developments are taking place, but in a random manner", arguing that:

...staff in colleges would benefit by knowing what was going on elsewhere and by being able to read of the experiences (and the problems!) that other colleges had had...There could be a wealth of information available for the benefit of those colleges involved in setting up courses in robot technology.

To overcome this problem, the authors proposed that their college might act as a "focal point for information... which we will collate and publish regularly".

Employer Inertia and State Intervention

As countless histories of further and technical education in England have shown, however, relying on the sustained support of employers is a risky business. We referred above to the Building Crafts Schemes because they signal the impact on the FE college curriculum when a government makes a direct intervention to boost the supply of trained workers. As a key part of the national recovery plans at the end of the second World War involved a significant expansion of the building industry, the Ministry of Education published a pamphlet in 1945 highlighting the inadequate state of apprenticeship in the industry:

In the years immediately prior to the war about 30,000 apprentices and others attended part-time classes in building subjects in technical schools and colleges in England and Wales... Only about one-tenth of these students were released by their employers to enable them to attend part-time day classes. The remainder,

⁴⁹ Source: Oldham College archive

about 27,000, attended in the evenings in their own time. The majority of these evening courses called for attendance on three evenings a week, together with additional time for homework. Thus it was not surprising that many apprentices found this a heavy load to carry, in addition to a full working week, and that some failed to persevere and achieve some measure of success. Others again did not attend such classes during their apprenticeship and therefore could derive no benefit from this provision of instruction. It was known that increased daytime attendance would have introduced marked improvements into this situation. Increases were in fact taking place, but development was slow and the distribution was uneven (Ministry of Education, 1945, p.3).

The pamphlet is remarkable not only for its criticism of employer behaviour, but also because of how it was produced – in essence it was a co-production by the key social partners involved in technical education. It explains that it was written by

"a number of H.M. Inspectors who have expert knowledge in this section of technical education... assisted both by a number of people engaged in the industry and concerned with apprenticeship, and also by a number of experienced principals, heads of departments and teachers concerned with building education in the technical colleges" (ibid, p.4).

The pamphlet provides a "set of model courses and syllabuses in order to facilitate the task of those who will be responsible for the organisation and conduct of such courses in the future" (ibid). The models drew on existing syllabuses, but with modifications "so as to bring the syllabuses into line with modern developments in craft technology". However, concerns were raised about what was perceived as the overly academic focus of programmes and the poor linkage between theoretical and practical aspects. A decade later, the Ministry outlined further attempts to respond to increasing technological change and outdated recruitment and training practices, as well as the significant rise post-war in the number of school leavers entering the labour market. It published two White Papers: a) *Technical Education in 1956*; and b) *Better Opportunities in Technical Education* in 1961. It was not until the *Industrial Training Act* was passed in 1964, however, that a much more robust and radical intervention was made.

The 1964 Act broke with the long-standing voluntarist approach of leaving workforce training to employers by imposing a levy (payroll) tax on companies that did not have their own training schemes. Money raised through the levy compensated those employers who did train. Sector-based Industrial Training Boards (ITBs), formed of equal numbers of trade union and employer representatives plus some educationalists, were established to both administer the levy. By 1972, 27 were in place covering an estimated 15 million workers plus a network of employer-led Group Training Associations (GTAs) specialising in engineering and construction (Sheldrake and Vickerstaff 1987). The levy system was modified in 1973 after sustained employer criticism. It would be three decades before a government tried one again in the form of the current apprenticeship levy. The ITBs varied in terms of their performance, but they contributed to improving the integration of on and off-the-job training and education, developed the use of phased assessment and modularisation, and encouraged employers to be clearer in their specification of training needs. The ITBs were abolished in 1982, apart from two covering the construction and engineering construction sectors.

Finally, in this section, we introduce two further policies that could be considered radical. The first was the establishment in 1963, of the Further Education Staff College (FESC). A Special Committee on the Supply and Training of Teachers of Technical Colleges chaired by Sir Willis Jackson (as mentioned above) had recommended the establishment of a residential college to bring together FE staff with representatives from industry and commerce, universities, and other related bodies concerned with advances in new technologies and the impact on the technical education curriculum and teacher training (Ministry of Education 1957). The FESC began offering management and administrative courses for senior FE staff and holding conferences and meetings at Coombe Lodge near Bristol in 1963. It was funded through contributions from industry and commerce and an annual grant for running costs from the Ministry of Education. One example of a course run in October 1964 entitled 'The Integration of Industrial Training and Academic Study' aimed to "study the contribution of industrial tutors, individual associated lecturers and college academic staff to this integration".²⁰

The FESC lasted until 1995 when it and the Further Education Unit (FEU), which we will return to in the next section, were replaced by the Further Education

²⁰ Available for view in the Coombe Lodge archive held at the UCL IOE library archive. FESC course document

Development Agency (FEDA). FEDA was replaced in 2000 by the Learning and Skills Agency (LSDA), which was replaced in 2006 by the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), which was replaced in 2008 by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) which was replaced in 2013 by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF). Part of LSIS's remaining funds were transferred to the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL), but that closed in 2021. The increasingly short life cycle of these and subsequent agencies which have influenced FE curricula since the 1960s deserves more detailed study than we have space for here, as does the history of FE teacher training.

The second radical policy intervention came in September 2001 when 16 'pathfinder' Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) were established, funded by the LSC, to:

...meet the needs of employers locally, regionally, nationally and sectorally...give more people from all backgrounds access to the high quality, vocational training that they need to succeed in a modern economy, and...spread good practice throughout the post-16 training sector (LSC 2003, p.6).

There was direct funding for CoVEs between 2000 and 2005. By 2003, 179 had been created but it is not clear if the original target of 400 by 2006 was achieved as the funding was not sustained and government attention switched (yet again) to announcing further initiatives such as Employer Training Pilots and Skills Academies. Examples of CoVEs included Construction Crafts (Accrington and Rossendale College), Travel and Tourism (Canterbury College) and ICT Networking Skills (Cornwall College). The LSC's 2002 evaluation of COVE pathfinders reported how being part of the initiative brought a range of benefits including raising the status of a subject area/ occupational field within their college, encouraging them to seek new ways of improving teaching and learning, to take risks and to invest more in staff development. This enhanced status "offered a degree of 'clout' which helped them *challenge curriculum and qualification design* and raise the status of vocational training with sector bodies" (our emphasis). (LSC 2002, p.11; see also LSC 2003). The term, CoVE, lives on through a network of centres funded through the European Commission's Erasmus programme and the term Centre of Excellence is used by WorldSkills UK for their teacher training centre run in partnership with NCFE.



Source: Coombe Lodge archive, UCL IOE library, London.

State-led Qualifications and 'Reform'

National government policies regarding the award of vocational qualifications the state is prepared to fund have had an influence on the FE curriculum since the early days of the Department of Science and Art's examinations. By 1921, the Board of Education was again expressing its concern over what it regarded to be the confusing and haphazard provision of courses and examinations, particularly for part-time students (Foden, 1951). Following agreement with the Institute of Mechanical Engineers to establish a national system of examinations tailored to local needs and circumstances, further discussions ensued to bring other institutions in scope, including the Institute of Chemistry, Electrical

Engineering Institution, and Gas Engineers. As a result, in 1922, the National Certification Scheme was introduced at two levels, Ordinary and Higher (ONC and HNC), based on part-time study of three and five years respectively, and Ordinary and Higher Diplomas (OND and HND) based on full-time study. Although the examination papers were externally set and marked (by awarding organisations such as the CGLI and the professional bodies), teachers had a considerable degree of curricular freedom in designing programmes of study. Figure X below provides an illustration of the range of subjects that could be covered in a CGLI ONC and HND in Business Studies in 1976.²¹

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<u>Ordinary National Certificate in Business Studies</u>		
<u>2 - year part-time course</u>		
<u>1st year</u>	<u>2nd year</u>	
Structure of Commerce	Economics	English
and three from	and two from	
Accounting I	Accounting II <u>or</u>	
General Principles of English Law	+ Principles and Interpretation	
Economic Geography	of Accounts	
Economic History	+ Mercantile or Commercial Law	
British Constitution <u>or</u>	+ Elements of Insurance	
Central and Local Government	+ Transport	
Modern Languages I	+ Functions and Organization of the	
Elements of Statistics <u>or</u>	Office	
Mathematics <u>or</u>	Modern Languages II	
Mathematics and Statistics I	Mathematics and Statistics II	
Elements of Computers I	Elements of Computers II	
	<u>or</u>	
	any subject not taken in the first year -	
	other than	
	Accounting I or Modern Languages I	
<u>Higher National Diploma in Business Studies</u>		
<u>3 - year sandwich course</u>		
<u>1st year</u>	<u>2nd year</u>	<u>3rd year</u>
Economics and 4 of the following	Applied Economics and 4 of the following	Business Finance and 4 of the following
Accounting	Advanced Accounting	Cost Accountancy
Principles of English Law	Mercantile Law	Company Law or Industrial Law
Distribution - Raw Materials Industry, Markets (home and overseas)	Transport Marketing (general)	Marketing Marketing (specialized commodities)
Elements of Statistics	Sociology of Industry and Commerce I	Sociology of Industry and Commerce II
Structure of Business	Applied Statistics	Market Research
Language Stage I	Advertising I	Advertising II
	Office Organization	Secretarial and Administrative Practice
	Language Stage II	Language Stage III

²¹ Source: Wheatley, D.E. (1976) *Apprenticeships in the United Kingdom*. Collection Studies. Social Policy Series no.30. Brussels: Commission of the European Communities.

The design principles involved three 'parties': the Ministry of Education, the technical college or other (examining) body responsible for the conduct of courses and examinations, and the 'Third Party' (sector representative body). General conditions were set out in 'Rules' published by the Ministry and drawn up in consultation between the Ministry and the sector body (Foden, *ibid*). During subsequent years more sectors followed. Writing from the vantage point of nearly 30 years after the National Certificates were introduced, Foden (*ibid*, p.7) argued that "There has been little attempt to criticise the Ministry for directing the system for its own ends, and in fact, the Ministry plays a very secondary role". Despite some unavoidable tensions between parties, the system operated effectively well into the 1970s when the state's role changed considerably.

The introduction of National Certificates was welcomed by colleges in industrial towns such as Oldham at a time when unemployment was rising, particularly in the textile industry, and college enrolments were dropping. In 1934, H.G. Taylor, the principal of the then Oldham Municipal Technical College, wrote an article in the *Oldham Evening Chronicle* entitled, 'National Certificates in Textiles: A Great Hope for the Future'. He wrote:

The incentive for educational progress which has lasted for a hundred years and which we therefore assume would last forever is gone for good. The question of incentive has to be tackled anew...The appeal to youth to come in and be educated calls for a new dynamic...The appeal, therefore, is to the youth of this town to come forwards with new hope, in full support of the National Certificate Scheme and see what happens.²²

By 1953, National Certificates formed a key part of the college's curriculum, including, for example, ONCs and HNCs in Cotton Spinning, Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering, and Building. Other courses on offer included:

- Preliminary courses (2 hours evening or day) in General Science, Engineering Drawing, Mathematics, Workshop Practice and English (Mechanical Engineering Department)
- Trade courses in Electrical Installation, Radio and TV Service Work, Refresher Course for adult

electricians (2 hours evening); and English for the Institute of Electrical Engineers' examination (Electrical Engineering Department)

- O and A Levels in Chemistry, Mathematics, Physics, English and French; London University Intermediate BSc Examinations; Intermediate Examinations of the Pharmaceutical Society; Refresher courses for qualified pharmacists, opticians etc; Baker Science. (Science Department)

There were tensions, of course, resulting from the increased state involvement in the life of colleges following the introduction of National Certificates. Although the available minutes of the meetings of the Derby Branch of the Association of Teachers in Technical Institutions from when it was founded in 1907 to 1973 are mainly concerned with employment conditions and pay, they also shed light on the irritation members experienced when government issued new regulations. For example, the minutes for the Annual General Meeting held at the then Derby Technical College in May 1949 record the members' approval of a resolution passed at the Bournemouth Sub-Branch that it viewed with "great concern" the extra work for colleges created by new instructions regarding the ONC and HNC examinations. In particular, the resolution noted the fact that the instructions had been issued "without any consultation with the individual lecturers responsible for the setting and marking of these papers or the Association representing them" (ATTI Derby Branch Minutes 1949²³).

Changes in the post-war economic landscape brought new demands for skilled technicians and technologists as well as people trained in the expanding commercial and administrative fields. Just as in the 19th century, there were concerns that Britain was falling behind other countries, notably the USA and Russia. The 1956 White Paper, *Technical Education*, announced that 10 FE colleges already providing degree-level courses would be reclassified as Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs), with the remaining colleges designated as regional colleges, technical colleges, and colleges of FE. As there was not sufficient existing capacity to create this ranking system in all LEAs, many colleges continued to offer both higher and further education. At the time of incorporation in 1992, 300 of the existing 465 FE colleges were offering higher education courses (Allen

²² Source: Oldham College archive.

²³ Derbyshire Local Records Office, Matlock.

and Parry, 2022). The listing above of courses to prepare people wishing to take the London University BSc examinations in the 1953 Oldham College prospectus reminds us that the inclusion of higher education in the FE curriculum has always played a significant role in widening participation (see Bathmaker 2016). Today, nine FE colleges have degree-awarding powers and many have franchise arrangements with universities to run degree-level courses including Higher and Degree apprenticeships.

TEC and BEC

As Raggatt and Williams (1998) have argued, the organic way in which National Certificates and Diplomas were created alongside other existing forms of certification led again to concerns in government about complexity and coherence. The 1961 White Paper, *Better Opportunities in Technical Education* recommended a number of reforms to existing courses and the introduction of new courses for craftspeople and operatives known as General courses (designated by G and the year of study e.g. G1, G2 etc.) that allowed progression on to Technician courses (T courses). These courses were examined by the CGLI and six Regional Examining Boards. Eight years later, the Department of Education and Science attempted a further rationalisation of the FE landscape with the publication in 1969 of the report of the Committee on Technician Courses and Examinations (known as the Hazlegrave Report). Hazlegrave recommended the establishment of two new bodies - the Technician Education Council (TEC) founded in 1973 and the Business Education Council (BEC) founded in 1974 - would have a far-reaching effect on the FE curriculum. Hazlegrave (DES 1969) is worth reading in the light of today's resurgence of focus on the concept of 'technical' education and 'technicians' (as captured in the T Level qualification introduced in 2020) in relation to both FE in general and apprenticeships (see also Cowan and Wilson's 2022 report on 'technical teachers' for the Gatsby Foundation; Wheatley 1976 and Fuller and Unwin 2010 for changes to apprenticeship; Fisher 2004 for a history of BEC; and Raggatt and Williams 1999 for a discussion of the tensions between TEC and CGLI).

TEC and BEC differed in their approach and coverage. TEC developed technician courses with 'essential' and 'optional' *units* at National and Higher National levels, whilst BEC's courses aimed at the lower-level equivalent to (the then) GCE O Level and comprised 'core' and 'optional' *modules* focused on three themes - people, money and communication. As (Fisher 2004,

p.240) explains, the distinctiveness of BEC was its "strong emphasis on integration of the curriculum...given practical expression by a requirement that students should undertake Cross-Modular Assignments". In 1980, R. Birbeck of the Electrical Engineering Department at Stockport College of Technology published an article in the *International Journal of Electrical Engineering Education* explaining how a single college or group of colleges designed TEC courses in response to technician job specifications identified through liaison with industries in their area:

A programme would comprise units written entirely by the college, units written entirely by TEC (standard units) or a mixture of college and standard units. The programme would include options to cater for both the more academic and the more practice student. The actual units taken in a programme are shown on the final certificate.

The programme would be submitted to TEC for approval. Any TEC award could be obtained by full-time, part-time day, part-time evening, block release, or sandwich-based attendance or a combination. Birbeck (1980, p.297) provides an illustration of a programme of study for a part-time 3-year Electronics Certificate comprising 15 60-hour units. Two aspects of the diagram stand out in comparison with what was soon to follow when competence-based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) appeared towards the end of the 1980s: a) the use of straightforward 'topic' headings; and b) the prevalence of college-derived units.

Birbeck (1980) argued that the new system had advantages including:

- Employers had a stronger influence over what their employees were studying.
- Students could see how their studies related to their employment and did not have to pass all the units studied in one year in order to progress.
- New technology could be introduced quickly into the programme and be transferred from higher to lower programmes as the older technology was phased out.
- Awards were made by one body.
- Entry requirements were flexible and could be modified by the college in consultation with the external moderator.

Year 1 (entry at Certificate of Secondary Education Level or equivalent)	Mathematics 1 STEC/E	Physical Science 1 STEC/E	Materials & Workshop Practice 1 STEC/E	Electrical & Electronic Systems 1 CU/E	General and Communication Studies A CU/E
Year 2 (entry at General Certificate of Education 'O' Level)	Maths 11 STEC/E	Electrical Principles 11 STEC/E	Electrical Drawing 1 STEC/E	Industrial Electronics 11 CU/E	General and Communication Studies B CU/E
Year 3	Mathematics 111 or Project 111 CU/P	Electrical Principles 111 STEC/E	Test Methods 111 CU/E	Digital Technology 111 CU/E	Industrial Electronics 111 CU/E

Code: CU=College Devised Unit; STEC = TEC Standard Unit; E = Unit Essential for Certificate; P = Optional Unit

The disadvantages related mainly to the administration of courses which was seen to have increased the work of both teaching and clerical staff, but Birbeck (1980) also refers to how the variation in content from one college to another could mean special bridging studies were required for students who transferred institutions.

The MSC and the impact of economic upheaval

TEC and BEC merged in 1983 to form the Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC), renamed the Business and Technology Education Council in 1991. We pick up what happened to BTEC later in this section but continue now with the expansion of the state's involvement in the shaping of the FE curriculum in the 1970s. Two major societal shifts had an impact on education policymaking. First, the raising of the school leaving age to 16 in 1972 brought a new group of learners into scope and with them came a raft of curriculum initiatives including courses designed to provide a broad-based introduction to a vocational area in addition to continuing general education and usually involving work experience.²⁴ Second, the 1970s global economic crisis which resulted in a dramatic rise in both youth and adult unemployment and a related further deterioration in manufacturing and apprenticeships, elicited a sustained attack from both Labour and Conservative governments on schooling and vocational education (Maguire 2022). Critics claimed young people were not developing the 'right skills' or 'attitudes'

required by employers and deemed essential for being resilient and adaptable in a rapidly changing world of work (Wellington 1987; Kelly 2001; Payne 2000).

The long-standing pattern of day-release and evening class attendance was giving way to more full-time modes of participation and courses for young people and adults on government-funded training schemes. Simmons (2008, p.365) argues that colleges were forced to broaden their remit and become more generalist institutions catering for a wider constituency of students, moves which challenged long-standing organisational structures and cultures including the autonomy of subject-based departments whose curricula often reflected local and regional economic activity.

Two government agencies – the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) set up in 1973 and linked to the then Employment Department, and the Further Education Unit (FEU) set up in 1977 and linked to the then Department of Education and Science (DES) – were now given a major role in FE curriculum development (see Seale 1984 and Payne 2000 for discussions of the tensions between the curricular approaches of the FEU and MSC). New types of one-year, full-time 'pre-vocational courses' were introduced including, for example: the Training Opportunities Scheme (TOPs) (1972) for adults; the Work Experience Programme (1976); the Youth Opportunities Programme (1978-1983); and the Certificate in Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) (1985).²⁵ In its report, *Young People and Work*, the MSC (1977) declared that those employers who turned down young

²⁴ Similar challenges later emerged with the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) in 2013 and 2015 (Acquah and Huddleston 2014).

²⁵ The Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) ran in parallel in schools from 1983 to 1991.

people for jobs did so "because of attitude, personality, appearance/manners, and inadequate knowledge of the 3 Rs". (MSC 1977: 17). As Payne (2000 p.354) argues, the MSC's language contrasted with the conception of skill held by policy makers in the 1950s and 1960s "as involving...'hard' technical abilities, combining physical dexterity, spatial awareness and technical 'know-how'".

In 1979, the FEU published *A Basis for Choice*, with the aim of bringing greater coherence to the range of pre-vocational courses that had emerged. It argued that pre-vocational courses should be designed around a 'common core of learning' (60% of the programme) comprising "the learning of generally applicable skills and capacities and the ability to transfer them" (FEU 1979:38). The remaining 40% of the programme would be divided between vocational studies and job-specific studies (see Avis 1983 for a critique of the FEU's ideas which were seen by some at the time as radical for appearing to promote learner-centred pedagogies and better understanding of young people's disaffection with mainstream education). The 'common core' heralded the arrival of a 'core skills' approach to curriculum design and aimed at providing opportunities for young people to develop:

- practical numeracy
- their ability to communicate
- their ability to learn from study, experience and colleagues
- social skills and understanding in a variety of contexts
- self confidence, self awareness and adaptability
- variety of manipulative and physical skills
- their awareness of various technological, environmental, political, economic and aesthetic factors which affect their lives
- a basis from which to make informed and realistic career choices and it should do this in the context of their intention to enter the world of work in the near future. (FEU 1979, p.12)

A contrast to the 'common core' approach can be seen in the weekly curriculum for a Pre-Apprenticeship Training in Course in Building for 15 year-old boys at Oldham College of Further Education in 1967²⁶:

- Workshop Practice (10 hours)
- Trade Technology (7 hours)
- Geometry and Drawing (3 hours)
- Mathematics (3 hours)
- Science (2 hours)
- English and General Studies (3 hours)
- Physical Education (2 hours)

In 1981, the MSC published a landmark report, *A New Training Initiative: A Consultative Document* (NTI), whose recommendation to introduce competence-based, assessment-led vocational qualifications based on employer-led 'standards' and an opening up of the training market to 'independent' providers is still affecting the FE curriculum more than 40 years later (see, inter alia, Stanton, Morris and Norrington 2015; Unwin 2010; Raggatt and Williams, 1999). The report recommended the expansion of training opportunities for adults through the existing TOPs programme. A 1977 case study of a West Midlands college shows it was running eight TOPs courses for Shorthand and Copy Typists, Cost and Wages Clerks, Retailing, and Clerk-Bookkeepers with some 120 students, plus up to 60 on pre-training courses (Gunn et.al. 1977). The biggest impact of NTI on FE, however, was its plans for the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) combining periods of work experience and off-the-job training which was launched in 1983 (initially as a one-year scheme and extended in 1986 to two years – see Finn 1987). From their research at the time, Stoney and Scott (1984, p.48) argue that, in the build-up to the launch of YTS, colleges were having to make curricular, staffing, financial and accommodation plans for unconfirmed numbers of trainees "on the basis of inadequate and volatile information".

²⁶ Oldham College archive.

The Design Framework for two-year YTS encapsulated the new curriculum turn in giving equal weight to four outcomes:

- Competence in job skills
- Competence in a range of transferable core skills (103 in total)
- Ability to transfer skills and knowledge to new situations
- Personal effectiveness

By 2000, the shifting and convoluted terminology of 'core skills' and their subsequent variants - 'soft skills', 'life and social skills', 'key skills' (1996 Dearing Review of 16-19 qualifications; Curriculum 2000), 'personal learning and thinking skills' (14-19 Diplomas), 'generic skills' - had become part of the FE teacher's vocabulary, to be replaced towards the end of the 20th century by '21st century skills' (Chalkiadaki 2018, p.10; Fettes 2012). As Silva (2009:631) points out, '21st century skills' (and their predecessors) "are not new, just newly important". For readers with a particular interest in the development of Skills Frameworks, a helpful summary is provided by Salas-Pico (2013). A key question, given these so-called skills are multi-dimensional and context-specific, is how they are conceptualised and taught/developed as both part of a general education entitlement and within technical and vocational programmes that are full of other content to be covered (Jephcote and Abbott 2005).

McGinty and Fish (1993, p.19) argue that the MSC had a more top-down relationship with colleges than the FEU through its focus on training outcomes rather than on broader educational aims and that this had a negative impact on the role of Her Majesty's Inspectorate: "The ability of HMI to influence course programmes was gradually eroded and its ability to influence policy has been slowly reduced. Most recent inspections have focused on the ways in which government initiatives are being implemented". These concerns intensified following the introduction of competence-based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in 1986, initially to provide qualifications for YTS, and General Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) in 1992. For a detailed review see Winch 2021.

Along with the new language of 'competence', the term 'curriculum-led management' entered the FE lexicon as both colleges and LEAs created specific posts for this purpose (see Smith 1987 for an FE college case study written at the time; Roberts 1988; FEU 1986). In a paper titled, 'Curriculum-led Institutional Development', presented at the British Educational Management and Administrative Society's (BEMAS) 12th Annual Conference in 1983, C.M. Turner from the Further Education Staff College (FESC), posed the following challenging questions:

Given that the prime purpose of a college is to facilitate student learning, can its organisation, operational activities and development be determined by the curriculum it provides? If there is at least some relationship between curriculum and the management and organisation of the college, what happens when the nature of student learning programmes undergoes rapid and radical change? Does the college get increasingly out of step with the curriculum? Or do colleges not perceive their management system and organisational structures as related to or determined by student learning? If the latter is the case, do colleges set up systems and engage in development plans which are as likely as not to work against student learning or at least do nothing to help it?²⁷

In 1982, delegates to the Spring General Meeting of the Association of Vice-Principals of Colleges (AVPC), held at the Birmingham College of Food and Domestic Arts discussed the impact of the *New Training Initiative*. A representative from the MSC told them that "The challenge facing the Training System is the problem of structural change and the country's vulnerability to international trade". He added that what had not been resolved was "whether we are producing a scheme for vocational preparation for the employed or for the unemployed or both together", but that this was achievable through "a modular approach" (AVPC 1982, p.1).

From her research in FE colleges in the 1990s, Lumby (1996:339) argued that, "The indication seems to be that the introduction of NVQs has, indeed, taken from teaching staff some of their power to shape the

²⁷ Abstracts of Unpublished BEMAS Conference Papers. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/174114328401200216>

curriculum, but the concomitant greater responsibility given to employers has not necessarily been taken up everywhere in the way anticipated." Similarly, Bloomer (1997:188) argued that:

In policy, planning and to some extent, practitioner circles it (the curriculum) has come to mean little more than a prescription of content coupled with a series of checks for its successful implementation. 'Objectives', 'outcomes' and 'quality assurance' now cover all, while 'delivery' is the metaphor to describe the process.

The arrival of NVQs and GNVQs posed considerable challenges for BTEC as well as the other existing qualification awarding organisations (see Fisher 2004 for a discussion). In 1996, BTEC merged with London Examinations to form the Edexcel Foundation which in 2003 was bought by the publishing group, Pearson. Although there are conflicting views on the extent

to which the BTEC philosophy afforded FE teachers curricular freedom, Fisher (2003, p.252) is clear in his assessment of BTEC's contribution:

Between 1979 and 1992 further education colleges experienced a period of curriculum implementation and development when learning and teaching styles were transformed from the 'chalk and talk' model to student-centred approaches that were integrated and coherent... The influence of the NCVQ in enforcing the instrumentalism of competence would replace this with a fragmented portfolio culture that buckled under the weight of its own monitoring and recording fetish.

A recent study by McGrath and Adhvani (2023) using a 'life histories' approach captures the experiences of BTEC students.

The following extract from a Level 2 NVQ in Hairdressing Level illustrates the approach.

ELEMENT 03.01 Treating hair conditions	
Performance Criteria	1. Stated the advantages of the salon's range of products in treating the listed conditions 2. Stated the treatment required for the third (unobserved) condition
Number of questions to be asked:	2 (one per performance criterion)
Outline questions and answers	
1.	Stated the advantages of the salon's range of products in treating the listed conditions Required: XXX questions List the [other] advantages of the products we use to treat [the condition(s)]. <i>A: Listed the advantages of the products the salon uses - where possible, avoiding 're-testing' on products which candidate has been observed explaining to clients (under, for example, 02.03/02.08/02.09).</i>
2.	Stated the treatment required for the third (unobserved) condition Required: XXX questions Explain the treatment of _____ [the third condition]. <i>A: Explanation of the treatment/list of the steps in treating the condition.</i> List the steps in treating [the third condition] <i>A: List of the steps in treating the condition/explanation of the treatment.</i>

Source: City and Guilds of London Institute, (December 1989) 3010/3011 NVQ in Hairdressing Level 11 The Foundation Certificate in Hairdressing. Draft Notes for Guidance

Balancing the 'liberal and the 'technical'

A long-standing debate, which continues today, focuses on the extent to which the FE curriculum, particularly in relation to vocational and technical education programmes for young people, should include a 'liberal' or 'general' education component.²⁸ It had a particular impact on the FE curriculum during the reconstruction period after the second world war when, as we noted earlier, day-release participation rapidly expanded and plans were being developed to boost the nation's technological capability and its stock of technicians. But the war had also reminded people about the negative aspects of technological progress (Venables 1955).

In 1947, the then Oldham Municipal School of Commerce produced a leaflet publicising a series of free Friday evening lectures to be held in the public library, noting that, "There is a tendency all over the country to develop adult education and these lectures are an attempt to cater for the growing demand". Oldham residents could choose from a diverse range of topics including, for example:

- School Leaving Age – 70?
- Telecommunications
- What Oldham is Doing for Youth
- Three Viewpoints on Riding a Bus (from a conductor, inspector, and passenger)
- A Symposium on Personality
- The Adventure of Ideas
- Can Democracy Survive?

In 1955, the National Institute of Adult Education (NIAE), supported by the Association of Principals of Technical Institutions, published a report, *Liberal Education in a Technical Age*, which concluded that at no stage or phase in education should "the values commonly associated with a general education" be dropped "because of the intense pressure of vocational preparation" (NIAE 1955). The report recommended that the timetables of day-release (including apprentices)

and full-time students should include 'general studies', and that colleges should establish Departments of General Studies with their own staff and dedicated space. This theme was then captured in the 1956 White Paper, *Technical Education*, which argued that "a place must always be found in technical studies for liberal education...We cannot afford either to fall behind in technical accomplishments or to neglect spiritual and human values' (Ministry of Education 1956, para.11).

In 1957 the Ministry of Education issued Circular 323, *Liberal Studies in Technical Colleges*, proposing ways in which colleges might think about how to include some new subjects and extracurricular activities, different styles of pedagogy and greater use of their libraries to support their students' development of "habits of reflection, independent study and free inquiry" (Ministry of Education 1957; see inter alia, Bailey and Unwin 2008; Simmons 2020 and 2014). Simmons (2016, p.698) points out the curricular freedom that this initiative afforded lecturers (though not all of whom were 'radicals'):

For much of its existence in FE, liberal studies was unmediated by the state, and rarely formally assessed. Teachers often had a substantial discretion over both content and delivery...LS/GS offered a space where practitioners were able to work collaboratively with young people and critique dominant ideas, beliefs, and myths about education, work, and society more broadly.

In 1966, two lecturers in the Department of Language and General Studies in Swindon College, Wiltshire³⁰, described their involvement in creating a syllabus for the introduction of General Studies classes for part-time engineering students on a two-year ONC course (72 hours in total divided into two separate hours per week) (Ashby and Seymour 1966). Their account, which formed part of a research project led by the then Department of Education and Science, and Reading University and involved seven other colleges in the South West, captures the freedom FE lecturers had at the time to experiment with the curriculum. Given the project predates the lampooning of Liberal and General

²⁸ For different perspectives on why the debate persists, see the Edge Foundation's website for papers from its *Principles of Vocational Education* project.

²⁹ Source: Oldham College archive.

³⁰ The college (now New College Swindon) traces its origins back to 1843 and the provision of classes for Great Western Railways workers.

Studies in Tom Sharpe's 'Wilt' novels, first published in 1976, Ashby and Seymour (1966, p.58) stress that "to be of value", General Studies "must be *meaningful and organised*" (their emphasis). Hence a balance had to be struck "between rigidity and the other extreme of chatting every week about what is in the news" (p.60). Assessment took the form of four 'extended student projects' over the two years.

The syllabus was organised around two themes: *Communication* and *Environment*. Students were told that communication was not "synonymous with English" or with the then GCE O Level, "the aim being to destroy the notion of the student that language...is merely a 'subject' and to make it an essential part of his (sic) experience" (ibid, p.59). They continued that if the course succeeded, the student would not only be "...fitted for his working situation but should have a firm grasp of the rudiments of language, a knowledge of how to think in terms of himself and his social situation...be able to think critically and not be submerged by the ad-mass".

The theme of Environment was organised into two components: Russian Studies and American Studies. Ashby and Seymour (1966, p.60) explained that the United States and the Soviet Union "...are the two major power blocs influencing the world scene today", echoing the ATTI's concerns mentioned in our introduction. They also note that this section of the course was "influenced by the experiments being carried out at present in the German educational system", where a thematic approach rather than the teaching of single subjects such as history, geography and social studies was being trialled. Six periods were left available to the lecturer to cover "any current affairs topics of vital importance".

Suggested topics for the Environment periods included:

- The geographical basis of the country and its natural resources
- An outline of the economy (as an example of 'modern capitalism' or 'modern communist organisation')
- Political and social issues – e.g. in relation to the US - slavery, the Civil War and 'the problem of the South'; in relation to Russia – Marxism-Leninism
- Modern American/ Soviet literature – some aspects of the novel, poetry, and drama

- American music (with emphasis on jazz and its influence on popular culture)
- 'Soviet realism' in Soviet art and music

In its prospectus for 1963-64, Oldham Municipal Technical College explained that its new Liberal Studies Department was "primarily concerned with the development of general and social education in the existing courses of the college" with the aim of helping students:

to understand the contemporary world and their place within it, to discover an adult standard of values, to find worthwhile pursuits with which to enrich their leisure, and to develop their ability to communicate effectively in speech, in writing, and in personal relationships.³¹

The department offered full-time GCE 'O' and 'A' Level courses, tuition in 'Technical English' to satisfy the requirements of various professional bodies such as the Institute of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, and foreign languages for technical students including, for example, in scientific and technical German "for those desiring to extend their knowledge...in order to read scientific and technical literature".

Both authors of this paper taught Liberal and General (and later Communication Studies) in the 1970s and early 1980s. One had studied for a postgraduate teaching certificate at the University of Manchester with Patrick McGeeney whose 1962 book, 'Progressive literacy: A text book in English and liberal studies', provided ideas on constructing a curriculum and lesson activities.³² In her college, she was afforded the time to engage both full and part-time students from both general and technical courses in running a college newspaper. The other author's experience included teaching day-release hairdressers studying for a CGLI qualification over two years. Whilst the syllabus set out the content to be covered and assessed in terms of hairdressing theory and practice, the general studies content was left to the professional judgement and expertise of the general studies teaching staff. The college day ran from 09.00 until 20.45. English classes (as they were then termed) were often the last in a long day and included, for example, poetry writing, contemporary drama, and giving presentations on fashion and hairdressing topics. There was no qualification requirement for these

³¹ Oldham College archive.

³² Published by Cassell.

general education aspects of the course, the only stipulation being that students should be afforded the opportunity to broaden their educational experience. Another example of curricular breadth is this timetable drawn from a two-year, full-time NNEB (National Nursery Examination Board) programme, where the general education programme was developed in collaboration with vocational staff:

Week A: Placement in nursery school, day nursery or residential setting (years 1 and 2 rotation)

Week B: Three days professional childcare studies; two days general education, including English, social studies, dance drama, art, environmental science, home economics, music.

The arrival of BEC in 1973 (as referred to above) with its focus on what students needed to learn in work or to gain employment challenged the provision of Liberal Studies. In 1976, BEC announced that:

... it will not require a separate package labelled 'liberal' or 'general' education...It is the Council's view that success in gaining a BEC award should indicate that the student has benefited from both a general and vocational education (cited in Fisher 2004, p.255)

A key focus would be on students learning "how to work with or get the best out of people" and the ability to "learn and use the form of communication appropriate to the task" (ibid). This extract from the 1988 *Teacher's Book* (Revell and Stott, 1988: introduction) captures the shift to a more functional approach:

Highly Recommended is designed to improve the job-related English of people who are training for, or who have already started, careers in hotel and catering. The functional aspects of the course describe the work routines of the following personnel: receptionists, porters, maids, doormen, waiters, waitresses and bar and kitchen staff. These work routines demonstrate a range of skills needed in a great variety of situations where employers have to use English with both customers and other members of staff.

In the following extract, we see how today's qualifications dictate a tightly defined specification of content in the form of Unit Learning Outcomes and associated Assessment Criteria, as for example in this unit from *Speak to Communicate Level I*:

Unit Learning Outcome 1 "be able to communicate with others". Assessment Criteria: "1.1 speak clearly in a way which suits the situation. 1.2 Express statements of fact, explanations, instructions, accounts and descriptions. 1.3 Ask questions to obtain information from different people and for different purposes."³³

Enrichment and Careers Guidance

The current government-led terminology for curriculum breadth is 'enrichment', though the FEFC (1996, p.2) used this term back in 1996 in a report of a survey of 206 colleges it had conducted to gather information about what it called "activities which colleges provide in order to extend students' education beyond their main course of study".³⁴ Interestingly, six colleges stated that they did not do so "as a matter of policy", of whom four cited insufficient funding, one "aimed to offer an adult alternative to the school or sixth form college experience", and "one expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of enrichment". The range of activities included sport, music, drama, cultural and practical activities, work experience and work shadowing, residential visits and study tours, foreign exchanges, health education, personal and social education, religious education, languages, information technology, group projects, outdoor pursuits, clubs and societies, and leisure interests.

Since 2013, 16-19 year-olds in full-time education have to be enrolled on a 'Study Programme' incorporating: a qualification; maths and English for those students who have not achieved a Grade 4 GCSE at age 16; work experience; and "other non-qualification activity to develop students' character, broader skills, attitudes and confidence, and support progression".³⁵ The following illustration provides details of one month's activities drawn from a college year's enrichment programme in 2022 for 16-19 year-olds.

³³ <https://www.gatewayqualifications.org.uk/unit/5464/>

³⁴ The AoC and a team at the University of Derby led by Professor Liz Atkins are currently conducting research on enrichment in FE colleges (funded by NCFE): see <https://www.aoc.co.uk/corporate-services/projects/the-role-of-enrichment-in-further-education-college-voices>

³⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/16-to-19-study-programmes-guide-for-providers/16-to-19-study-programmes-guidance-2022-to-2023-academic-year>

SEPTEMBER World Alzheimer's and Dementia Month

College theme for the month – settling in, well-being, culture and inclusion.

Enrichment clubs – Promotion of clubs ready for launch 26th Sept, including Journalism Club, Pool Club, Film Club, Brew Mondays, Wed Sports afternoon, LGBTQ+ Network, BAME Network

Enrichment events – VP inductions, freshers fairs, Prevent workshop, Muslim Women's Network, Health Exchange, Barista workshop – run your own business.

Learner voice/student council – introduction to student reps and governors, pop-up shops to promote roles, all reps. in place by end of month.

Community engagement/fund raising – Macmillan World Biggest Coffee Morning, Birmingham City Mission

Well-being activities – launch of all cross-college activities, Sports Wednesdays

Guest speakers – West Midlands Police, Samaritans, Young Carers.

In addition to the requirements set out for Study Programmes and T levels, where such elements are described as 'employability', 'enrichment' and 'pastoral', there is an obligation for all colleges to: "publish a summary of careers programme that can be accessed by students, parents, teachers and employers and demonstrate how they are working towards achieving the eight Gatsby benchmarks".³⁶ Those benchmarks are:

1. A stable careers programme
2. Learning from careers and labour market information

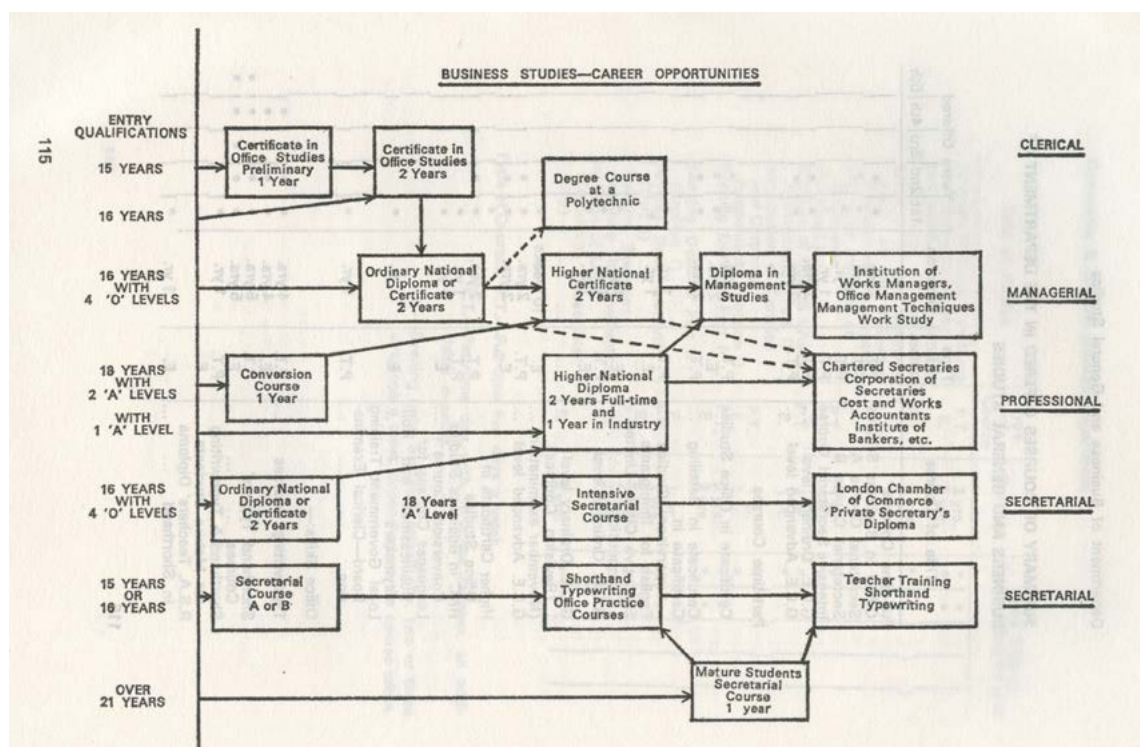
3. Addressing the needs of each student
4. Linking curriculum learning to careers
5. Encounters with employers and employees
6. Experiences of workplaces
7. Encounters with further and higher education
8. Personal guidance

Providing careers guidance through a mixture of formal and informal means has always been part of the FE curriculum. The illustration from the Department of Business and General Studies section in Oldham College of Technology's 1970/71 prospectus shows a 'career map' which links courses and qualifications to the occupational structure of the day (see page 28).

The Gatsby benchmarks are a mixture of pedagogical concerns around the way in which learning is organised whilst others reflect contexts of learning. Today, therefore, support for students has become an integral part of the curriculum and linked to Ofsted's inspection criteria. Where once general and liberal studies sessions were regarded as 'complementary education' providing opportunities for vocational students of all ages to engage with the arts and humanities, and the social sciences, today the focus tends to be on providing young students with experiences (and information) that could be useful for their future. Yet, if usefulness is the goal, there is a significant omission as identified in a recent study (Collen et.al. 2023) of the availability of languages in FE colleges in the UK. The study found that many FE colleges have no languages provision with 'cold spots' in the north, east and southwest of England. The authors argue that despite the opportunity to embed global language skills in the new T-levels in England, they too do not have any compulsory language learning component:

...economic arguments about the value of languages for the UK are not being heard. There is little evidence of the integration of language learning into core programmes and vocational qualifications, or that this is considered at senior management level. There is a sense in our data that arguments for languages as enablers of social cohesion have been lost" (p.12).

³⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/16-to-19-study-programmes-guide-for-providers/16-to-19-study-programmes-guidance-2022-to-2023-academic-year>



Source: Oldham College archive.

The 2016 Post-16 Skills Plan, repeating the exact sentence that had appeared in the Sainsbury Review three months earlier, stated that: “Routes through the best international technical education systems begin with a broad curriculum, then increasingly specialise as an individual progresses to higher levels of knowledge and skills” (DBIS/DfE 2016, p.49, our emphasis). Yet, in current 16-19 Study Programmes, additional activity is highly prescribed.³⁷ We do not have the space here to explore the impact of curriculum change on pedagogy in the FE college, though, of course, they are intertwined (for discussions see, for example, Maxted 2015; Thompson 2009; James and Biesta 2009).

In concluding this discussion of the myriad ways in which the FE curriculum could be and has been broadened, we return to the vexed question of resources and affordability that we touched on in the introduction to the paper. In 1998, the then National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (Natfhe) commissioned a survey of managers and lecturers in 12 colleges on the impact of the FEFC's funding rules on teaching and learning. The findings

showed that the amount of time allocated to many courses had been significantly reduced over the years as these two comments reveal (Leney et.al. 1998, pp 15-16):

When I first started teaching in the seventies - 30 hours for a full-time 16 year-old general education student. We're now down to 16 hours.

Eight years ago when I came to this college, a BTEC National Leisure Studies course was teaching about 24 hours a week. We're down to 16 hours a week and we've still got to maintain the same quality, the same output - which is nigh impossible.

Although international comparisons of post-16 education and training can be problematic due to the complex nature of different national systems, research has shown that both full and part-time courses in England are shorter and narrower than many other European countries (Robinson and Dominguez-Reig 2020).

³⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/16-to-19-study-programmes-guide-for-providers/16-to-19-study-programmes-guidance-2022-to-2023-academic-year>

Concluding remarks and further research

The evolution of the FE curriculum in England continues to exhibit characteristics that were there as colleges emerged towards the end of the 19th century, notably the pressure to respond to the demands (and fickleness) of both individual learners and employers. As this account has tried to show, there have been periods of intense government involvement leading to short-lived structural changes and abandoned initiatives. Every new policy has implications for the way colleges and their departments are organised as well as resources and staffing. As Stanton, Morris, and Norrington (2015, p.79) argue, over the past 40 years, the continuous, government mandated qualification reforms have: "...cost the state, the awarding bodies, and FE providers considerable sums of money" and "damaged the interest of learners who had experienced these 'product recalls'". Despite the policy merry-go-round, most learners will continue to decide what they want to study, and employers will choose (and in some

cases co-produce) courses that suit their business needs. Constructing and refining a curriculum that can withstand the stormy conditions blowing outside a college's walls is a herculean task.

In this paper, we have attempted to shine a spotlight on some of the key ways in which the FE curriculum has evolved over the years. We hope it might stimulate colleagues who are also interested in FE history to find more illustrations as well as shining their own light on initiatives and events we have not had the space to cover. In particular, we are conscious that many curricular developments have been driven by local events that may only be captured in individual prospectuses, academic board papers and governance reports. We conclude with a table showing the responsibilities of the key organisations who have a direct impact on the FE curriculum.

Ofsted	The Education Inspection Framework's (EIF) four key judgements are made on: quality of education; behaviour and attitudes; personal development; leadership and management. The inspection of the curriculum focuses on its: intent, implementation, and impact.
Local authority, Combined Authorities, and the DfE	Their priorities focus on labour market needs, for example sector skills shortages, emerging industries (digital, cyber), adults with ESOL requirements, the unemployed. Funding allocations are tied to such priorities and colleges are required to respond accordingly, often at short notice. But local, regional and national demographics differ as do the needs of urban and rural communities. Whilst national priorities emphasise the importance of higher-level skills, the local reality may indicate the need for Entry level and Level 1 provision.
Awarding organisations (AOs)	AOs specify a qualification, not the broader curriculum, but to receive funding colleges must only offer qualifications approved by the regulator (Ofqual) and listed on the Register of Recognised Qualifications. This restricts choice and flexibility – a particular concern in the context of current reforms to level 2 and 3 qualifications. It highlights the continuing misunderstanding amongst non-educational stakeholders that the qualification is the curriculum.
Education and Skills Funding Agency	Provides assurance that public funds are properly spent, achieves value for money for the taxpayer and delivers the policies and priorities set by the Secretary of State and, where necessary, provides financial support for colleges.
The FE Commissioner	Works with all statutory Further Education colleges to improve the quality of education for learners, strengthen financial resilience, improve the quality of leadership, and reduce the risk of colleges requiring interventions

This table raises many questions, but we offer the following as starting points for a bigger discussion:

- Where are FE colleges, teachers and curriculum managers represented in this regime of control? How far is their expertise and experience shaping the regime?
- To what extent can tensions in the FE curriculum be resolved given the multiple demands being made upon it?
- How can student choice and aspiration be accommodated within tightly controlled qualification and funding criteria?
- To what extent do the priorities listed above take account of the needs of learners, including those who need manageable stepping stones to enable them to progress from Entry Level to Level 2?
- How far do current policies and practices in FE teacher training recognise and discuss the historical development of the FE curriculum?

Finally, as we were finishing this paper, Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, threw another sizeable rock into the FE curriculum pond. Speaking at the 2023 Conservative Party Conference, he announced plans to develop the 'Advanced British Standard' (ABS) for 16 to 18-year-olds to bring together A levels and T levels into a single qualification. The DfE website declared: "The ABS will ensure technical and academic education are placed on an equal footing, with every student also studying some form of maths and English to age 18".³⁸ Whether this will happen is open to question, but another 'consultation' is about to start.

³⁸ <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/10/05/the-advanced-british-standard-everything-you-need-to-know/>

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