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Understanding The Reputation Of Further Education (FE): Some Historical Comparisons

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Abstract

The website 'FE histories and time line' was developed from a research study entitled *The reputation of English FE – understanding the evolution of the sector (1944-1996)* supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the University of Exeter. This paper is an opportunity to elaborate further on the phenomenon of reputation with respect to FE colleges during the 1950s and 1960s. Reputation is considered to be a dynamic concept that emerges from the everyday images that individuals form, based on their experiences with an organisation as well as the communications and symbolic messages from the organisation itself (Gosti and Wilson, 2001). Narratives gathered from former college staff members and archival evidence are deployed to show that the reputation of FE colleges was far more firmly and widely established in this previous era than in subsequent decades. This shift is discussed in the light of significant challenges to the connectivity of colleges within local constituencies.

Key words

Reputation; Constituencies; History; FE Sector.

Introduction

When asked to recall a specific FE institution operating during a specific time period, be it historic or more contemporary, it is likely that respondents' commentaries will differ greatly. This is because an individual's conceptions of the FE sector are based on the nature of their experiences with a particular college, varying in degree from extensive, first-hand contact to being almost non-existent. Indeed, it has been observed that for some public sector organisations, including for example FE colleges, many people may merely know of their existence and have no direct knowledge of these institutions or how they operate (Luoma-aho, 2007). In light of this, certain caveats have to be taken into consideration whilst drawing up the aims of this paper. First, it is difficult to draw together numerous potentially conflicting subjective views on reputations; whether historical and/or contemporary. Second, the connection between the reputation of a particular college and the reputation of the FE sector as a whole, and how each links or contributes to the other, is not entirely clear (Hall and David, 2008). Therefore, the decision is taken to focus in this paper at one level only; that of individual institutions. Further, it is deemed more illuminating to investigate constituencies whose commentaries may contribute to the reputation of FE. That is, the focus in this paper is to reflect on relevant interview and archival data so as to identify particular constituencies that had close dealings with FE at the college level and worked towards fostering its reputation.

Identifying The Elements Of A College's Reputation In The Post-War Era

At the classroom level, two elements have emerged from the narrative data as being significant regarding the construction of reputation: the nature of the teaching programmes, and connections with employers. With respect to the latter, as a member of staff, the vocational lecturer's role included monitoring performance and attendance and directly reporting any lapses to the line managers in firms who were sending part-time and day-release students from their place of work. Reporting back, by and large, stood in place of what more contemporary staff would know as pastoral care or personal tutoring.

Further, the lecturer, together with more senior college staff, such as heads of department, was responsible for devising the contents of the teaching programmes. This was achieved by negotiating with key employers over what to teach their workers, as programmes could often be tailored to fit the work duties of trainees.

> "*We had to have a very good relationship with the employers because the employer was so sensitive to what was successful and what was unsuccessful in his or her field. So for that we had to have a very good relationship with the employer and have meetings 'one to one' where you totally respected each other. The employer respected you because he wanted you to do a good job for him. But you respected the employer because you had what they wanted. The trick was you had to meet their needs or they went to someone else. To do that you went to their sites and you listened to their senior managers, you visited the chief technicians, you watched them at work and they told you what they wanted to be taught. So we were incredibly sensitive to the important employers*"

> (Former Lecturer in Engineering)

Given that there were numerous programmes offered by the different trade organisations and the regional examination boards, there was a great deal of flexibility and few demands on staff that they worked to a fiercely prescribed remit. At this time, the lengthy series of examinations for college learners following vocational qualifications was considered to be severe. Venables (1967) has described this arduous ladder of attainment as being a hard way to success. Very few managed to complete it in full and much status and recognition as master craftsmen was accorded to those people in their respective fields who were successful. At the higher end of the spectrum these qualifications were often much more occupation-specific than many of the more generic and more accessible vocational qualifications of later years.

Turning to consider employers, as one lecturer recalled, those working in partnership with their college comprised well-regarded private sector industrial giants and government research establishments. These relied on their local college for bringing on personnel, starting with school leavers learning apprenticeship competencies and progressing through to established staff, following graduate level studies in niche subjects.

> "*The vast majority of the work was done by people called laboratory technicians. Now initially those people were not graduates, they were the people who had come straight from school either at the age of 15/16 or 18. The actual day-to-day research in scientific research organisations based in industry was done by those people. They were doing original work in science and had they been able to publish that work they would have automatically been given credit in the science journals but the work they did was owned by their employers and in the case of most of our industry, it was totally secret because either they were working for the military or they were research establishments like ICI who were getting a lot of money. So everything they did was owned by their employers and so they got no public credit whatsoever for doing it, but they had an extremely high status at work because everybody knew that they were the people that did the real work.*
>
> *The employers made no attempt to teach them – that was our job. That's extraordinary when you come to think about it; the employers were technically very confident as they were research organisations, but they expected us to teach their people practical techniques. We did it all. So we were expected to be very competent indeed. Not only had we to teach them the theory that they*

*needed, but how to do the practical work safely in a work environment and we
had to teach them technically competent practical work because their
employers didn't want to have high costs due to practical work that went wrong
because the equipment smashed or experiments failed."*

<div align="right">(Former Lecturer in Science)</div>

In sum, this evidence suggests that a wide range of individuals, ranging from school leavers through to established workers, had direct contact with their local college. As a consequence, across the local business community and other social networks, a substantial number of well connected and established individuals, who occupied blue and white collar roles in important firms, had first-hand college experience. They could draw upon this to make sense of what the FE college was contributing to the community and to their own lives, not least in terms of qualifications that enjoyed respect from those in their chosen vocational field.

Moving on from the practices of lecturing staff, the next element involved in constructing a platform of reputation for a college concerned the activities of vocational departments. A part of college life commented on by interviewees was the advisory committee structure through which each department was matched with a group of volunteer local business advisors. In the interview data, such advisory bodies were varyingly described as either being supportive of the department or as being rather pushed around by the all-powerful heads of departments. An active advisory committee usually comprised members who could give insights into the state of local industry and commerce regarding labour force needs. Furthermore, these advisors could keep college staff up-to-date with regards to technological advances either through offering them short-term placements or by donating spare industrial equipment. Moreover, the membership of these committees served as fertile recruitment ground for enlisting the services of knowledgeable and committed governors and chairs of governing bodies for colleges. An often mentioned additional spin-off between the advisory committee members and the vocational departments took the form of industry-sponsored college prizes (see Figure 1 below) distributed annually at a formal ceremony. This event was usually covered in great detail by the local press and offered benefits to all parties involved: business leaders could celebrate their positive community citizenship through their college sponsorship; the college departments could promote themselves as supporting skilled craftwork; and the young people could raise their profiles with regards to their prospective employers. With college connections firmly established with owners of small to medium-sized local firms and managers seconded from larger national companies by their serving on the advisory committees, there was a wide reach of knowledge about FE amongst salient business players in the locality.

Figure 1: Examples of college prizes

<div style="border:1px solid black; padding:10px;">

<div align="center">*Department of Mechanical Engineering Crafts*</div>

The Cooper Cup presented by GF Cooper Esq. for the best Craft student of the year.

The AN Vesty Prizes: one of 3 guineas for the best Machine Shop Engineering student and one of 2 guineas awarded to the best Craft student of the year.

The School of Engineering Prize Fund contributed to by many of the Engineering firms of the City and District out of which course prizes are awarded annually.

</div>

Source: Leicester College of Technology (1962: p. 28)

An additional dimension needs to be considered when pinpointing the constituencies that were well placed to contribute to FE colleges' reputations during the post-war years. That is, the local political arena in which college principals and governors networked with local

councillors and the education authority officers at their city or county hall. Under their post-war schemes for FE and plans for county colleges (Ministry of Education, 1947), the directors of the education authorities proposed the committees through which councillors would oversee the administration of colleges and youth services. This ensured accountability to the elected representatives regarding decisions that were to have an impact on FE locally. The inclusion of representatives from each college in the local committee structure created network opportunities between a specific FE college's principal, leaders of other colleges and the public sector Higher Education institutes in the locality, as well as with the FE officers of the Local Education Authority (LEA). Moreover, through the wider education committee, representatives of this sector could become connected with representatives of schools and children's services (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: The Governing Bodies of institutions of FE for Leicester City from 1949
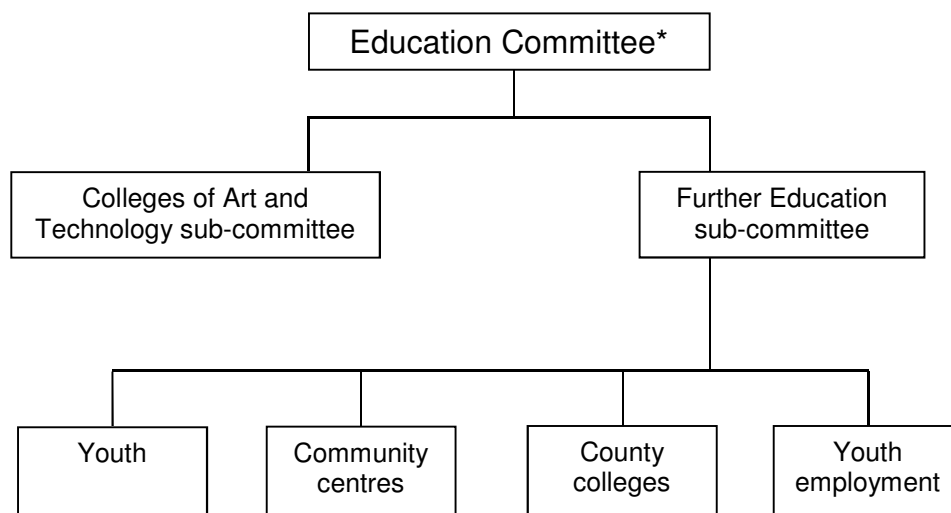
*'*The arrangement of committees concerned with FE in Leicester from May 1949. There is a FE co-ordinating committee which meets as required to consider policy affecting the whole field of FE* City of Leicester Education Committee (1949: p. 44).

Examination of the interests of some individual members of college governing bodies has revealed that they could occupy high status civic positions in the local community beyond their college roles. For instance, the life work of Charles Keene demonstrates how one individual could be an effective advocate for vocational education and training in his community (City of Leicester Education Committee, 1961). Elected as a councillor in Leicester in 1926, eventually serving as mayor in 1953, he was extensively involved in technical education, the arts and town planning, being at the heart of urban post-war reconstruction. Regarding his education-related interests, he was a key figure in establishing both Higher and Further Education institutes in the city, initially serving on the council of the University College before becoming a pro-chancellor for the University of Leicester. In addition to this, before the war, he became the chair of the governing body of the Colleges of Art and Technology, a position he held for several decades. At the same time he participated in secondary education by serving as the chair of the board of governors of the Gateway School, a technical secondary school (McCulloch, 1989). A further demonstration of his commitment was his long-term service as the chair of the general purposes sub-committee of the education committee and the chair of the secondary education sub-committee of the LEA. In 1963, when the Lero campus of the Colleges of Art and Technology was established as a college of FE in its own right, the Institute was named after Alderman Keene in recognition of his service to education and,

subsequently, he was appointed as the first chair of the board of governors for the Charles Keene College of FE.

The case of Sir Charles Keene may be an extreme example of how one person carried considerable responsibility for the promotion of technical education in his community. No doubt, in other parts of the country there were similar leading figures with connections across their respective communities. This may have been a feature of post-war decades, one which is not found in contemporary society given the high degree of specialism and separation of responsibilities that is demanded of public servants. This is a robust example of how superbly connected and well-embedded representatives could voice the cause of a particular college, and vocational education and training in general, in political arenas when significant local policy decisions were being made, for example, regarding the allocation of resources and staffing to FE. It is reasonable to suggest that with high profile advocates networking at city/county hall level, the profile of an FE college was constantly being raised and hence its reputation promoted amongst key local civic actors.

Shifts in the reputation platform
Above, several dimensions of the reputation platform of a college have been illustrated with respect to evidence pertaining to the 1950s and 1960s. Building upwards from the classroom level, it has been shown that in an era when a local economy comprised large-scale enterprises and government establishments, many people tended to experience first-hand training at the local college and hence the reputation of the college was deeply embedded within a large section of the local community. This situation may have been challenged when the widely recognised phenomenon of the de-industrialisation of the economy marked a decline in the demand for apprenticeship training towards the end of the 1960s. Moreover, when government agencies were privatised and in-house training became the norm across the private and public sectors, FE lost more of its work supporting employed learners, particularly its running of specialist courses aimed at middle management employees. A potential implication for the robustness of college reputation at that time is that far fewer employed learners following both lower and higher-level training had direct experience of colleges, as would have been gained from the mass participation in the arduous ladder of vocational certification that was commonplace in the earlier era. Further, the absence of personal FE experiences for these sections of the community may have allowed space for an image of the local college as being best suited to other people's children (Wolf, 2002) to gain currency.

Considering college connections with local industry, it may be that the loss of many local engineering and manufacturing firms, and the drastic cost-cutting undertaken by those that survived the economic slump of the late 1960s and early 1970s, contributed to their playing a reduced role in voluntarily supporting college life. The pressures brought about by central government introducing more compulsory dimensions to the participation of firms in the support of vocational education and training, such as the rolling out of the industrial training board initiative under the Industrial Training Act (Ministry of Labour, 1964), could likewise have influenced business communities' orientations towards working with colleges (Rainbird, 1992). Regardless of the colleges' reasons for eventually disbanding long-standing structures, such as advisory committees and industry sponsored prizes and awards, overall there appears to have been a decline in the potential for goodwill between departmental staff and business leaders. This, in turn, could be interpreted as leading to a smaller and less robust reputation platform for a college.

The most complex dimension contributing to the reputation base of FE colleges was identified above as being the civic arena. Through the terms of the 1944 welfare state

settlement, government was in no position to dictate action to LEAs. Consequently, with policy decisions being made by committees at the county/city hall level, it was to be expected that there were well-informed advocates engaged at this level who lobbied in favour of FE provision, i.e. to obtain the college funding for its staffing, resources and facilities. However, from the 1970s onwards, promoting the FE college in this arena came under severe pressure from a number of central government-driven shifts in policy. For instance, the reorganisation of local government in 1974 brought about the amalgamation of some large urban districts into their neighbouring shire counties along with the transfer of the education administration to the county level. As a result, in cities where this happened, the somewhat familiar relations between advocates for the college and city hall staff were broken up. The often previously favoured local college was demoted to being just one amongst many institutes competing for the attention of the countywide education committee and LEA officers.

"*In those days we were controlled by the borough council. Reading Borough Council only had one institution and it was proud of it, it had a rather grand building, a 1950s building that had only been there a very short time. When we were successful they could boast about the ability and the success of the institution that we were creating here locally. And of course they were also on our side because our success is reflected glory on them. Now when the local authority was called the Reading Borough Council because we were the only college we were their pride and joy, they owned us but on the other hand we gave a great deal of satisfaction and the Principal related to the Local Authority like a house on fire. The Principal didn't relate to the industries at all nor to the local employers; no one except the local authority. They were in his pocket and he ran them. A powerful Principal, a successful Principal, could make the authority do exactly what he wanted them to do. Now that went on until local authority reorganisation and we moved out of Reading into Berkshire. Berkshire took over Slough, Bulmershe, Reading, Newbury and so on. Now, at that moment, all of us who were moderately senior members of staff were invited to a conference and we were addressed by the overall Berkshire County Council officers. So we all turned up and listened and a Berkshire officer said 'with all respect to Reading they must remember that the senior primary colleges in Berkshire are going to be colleges of Higher Education and Bulmershe, and Reading will have to take a third ranking behind them'. And we all came back to college and collapsed because all of a sudden our bubble was pricked and from then on, we were fighting against the other colleges to get what we wanted.*"

(Former Manager, Reading College)

Directly linked to central government responses to enduring economic and social pressures of the mid 1970s was the phenomenon of new vocationalism. This comprised a range of employment initiatives and investigation of the fitness for purpose of vocational qualifications, all of which attempted to '*...promote greater articulation of education and work at the school and further education levels*' (Silver, 1988: p. 3). A significant step towards this occurred in 1973 with a White Paper, which was quickly followed by the Employment and Training Act, which contained the government's plans to set up the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) as an executive arm of the Department of Employment. This proved a novel avenue for funding for colleges and formed an alternative source to LEA monies. By 1972, programmes for addressing the issue of unemployment were already underway (for example the Training Opportunities Scheme) but with the MSC in place, many more initiatives were embarked on. The introduction of the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) (1983) and the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) programme (1982) serve to highlight changes that impacted upon the

reputation of FE, particularly with respect to a college's platform for reputation building with its county/city hall.

Turning firstly to the introduction of the YTS, this can be identified as setting down new boundaries for the relationship between colleges, employers, the LEAs and the MSC. Previous pre-employment programmes, although often located on the periphery of a college's activities, had relied heavily on college staff for their organisation as it was mainly colleges that were appointed by the MSC as programme deliverers. However, a significant shift occurred with the arrangements for the YTS because of the requirement to recruit organisations other than colleges as managing agents. That is, the decision was taken to enlist employers and training consortia in preference to colleges as the leaders for the programmes in local areas. Stoney and Lines (1987) have summarised four effects that this particular initiative had on the FE sector, most of which had negative implications with regards to its reputation building, not least in the local civic arena: first, it marked the start of major amounts of direct government funding as opposed to LEA monies reaching colleges; second, there was a shift in the control of vocational education away from the FE sector and the Department for Education and Skills, and towards the MSC, employers and employer-led agencies; third, colleges were for the first time placed in direct competition with other agencies in bidding for contracts in training and education, and; fourth, the programme introduced to the sector young people of *'...widely differing attributes, motivations and needs into many FE establishments'* (p. 3).

The creation of the TVEI by the Conservative government has been described as being like '*a bolt from the blue*' with '*...neither the DES, the LEA associations, the teacher professional organisations, nor even the MSC*' (Dale et al, 1990: p. 12) being involved in consultations before it was announced by the Prime Minister. In essence, the aim of the TVEI pilots, and the full programme that subsequently emerged, was to arrange consortia of schools and colleges to bring about changes in what children, from age 14 upwards, were taught and how they were taught, in order to bring education closer to the world of work. The TVEI brought many challenges to the position of an LEA regarding overseeing what went on in its territory as, for the first time, the MSC could establish and run programmes in colleges (and schools) with these being monitored by a local steering group that reported centrally to the TVEI managers in the MSC (Moon and Richardson, 1984). So as to support this, government made substantial project funds available for which LEAs submitted detailed applications which became the basis for binding contracts between the parties. To give an indication of the comparative dominance of the TVEI, it has been reported that by 1984 it had secured '*...a quarter of the budget for work-related non-advanced Further Education*' (Raggatt and Williams, 1999: p. 33). In effect, the home of the TVEI, the MSC, was an executive board that had responsibility for delivering their programme objectives on a commercial-like basis with efficient performance and effective value for money being an essential aspect of accountability regarding their joint operations with colleges and schools. These key features partly explain why the agency, at least in the short term, enjoyed a great deal of political support, whereas the LEAs, and the DES, were very much out of favour with the government of the day.

Concluding thoughts regarding reputation platform
Building the platform for reputation in the post-war era involved a wide range of constituent groups, including students from many walks of life, business leaders and local politicians who helped embed a college's roots deep into the fabric of the surrounding community. For instance, it has emerged that everyday college routines involved employers' representatives who worked alongside lecturers, who in turn, were trusted by their line managers and, most importantly, given the wherewithal to engage extensively with these

representatives in their respective fields of vocational expertise whilst developing their practice. A further example has been given of the advisory committees that were made up of salient business people from the locality. For various reasons, these constituencies have changed over time.

The particular programmes of the 1980s outlined above, and even the MSC itself, eventually disappeared and their long-term impact on resolving unemployment and training-related issues remains debatable. However, regarding the building of the reputation platform for colleges, they may be associated with ushering in a policymaking environment where much of the connectivity that had been fostered in the post-war years was no longer pivotal. That is, the move away from the local civic arena being the locus of crucial decision making was clearly indicated by the introduction of budgets, accountability and monitoring channels that, by and large, bypassed the LEA structures and, particularly in the case of the TVEI, flowed between practitioners and project managers and the MSC officials located in government. These innovations meant there were reduced opportunities for promoting the case of FE between college leaders, locally elected councillors and LEA officers.

It should be noted that the policy events of the early 1980s can be viewed as merely a foretaste of the major impacts on connectivity and the platform for college reputation that were experienced under the Education Reform Act (DES, 1988) and the Further and Higher Education Act (DfE, 1993). By the time of the publication of the Foster Review (DfES, 2005) it was generally accepted that the FE sector suffered from an overall weak reputation. In fact, Foster pointed out that as early as 1996, Kennedy, in her report on widening participation (Learning Works), had found that few policymakers situated in government had any real grasp of FE matters. This poor state of reputation is not that surprising given the decline of the local civic arena and the loss of many of the elements that contributed to the connectivity that had helped build college reputation during the post-war decades.

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