

U.K. FE and U.S. community colleges

Patrick Ainley

Ann Hodgson (ed.) (2015) *The Coming of Age for FE? Reflections on the past and the future role of further education colleges in England*. London: Institute of Education Press. £24.99. 223 pages

Clifford P. Harbour (2015) *John Dewey and the Future of Community College Education*. London: Bloomsbury. £17.99. 178 pages

General further education colleges in the UK and community colleges in the USA face similar pressures which both these books recount to suggest ways forward for their respective institutions.

Perhaps it is this optimism that there is a way forward for FE and not the imminent demise often forecast for it that accounts for the complacent-sounding title of Ann Hodgson's collection – although it is followed by a question mark. It brings together *Reflections on the past and future role of further education colleges in England* by a community of FE practitioners long involved in what can be called the Institute of Education's professional project for FE. This has been sustained by Ann Hodgson and her long-time collaborator Ken Spours over many years through the Institute's Post-16 Centre. She edits chapters that deal with different aspects of FE, including one with photographs on the architecture of the colleges old and new, judiciously avoiding many overlaps or contradictions – that I noticed anyway!

However, it is more than 21 years since the incorporation of the colleges in 1993 but it is that year that could have been presented as FE's coming of age / Cinderella finally going to the ball

etc. Or perhaps 1997 when Helena Kennedy wrote what seemed at the time almost a manifesto for the sector in *Learning Works*. Then it looked as if the third sector of education was at last going to be recognised and celebrated by government to reverse its negative definition of not being school or university into the positive affirmation that it did not fail anybody and nor did it turn anybody away. Indeed, this was an important part of the professional identity of FE lecturers.

The flowering was brief however and is recalled not even with nostalgia because it has been so completely erased for most of the current ground-down and demoralised fungible labourers in the merged and pared-down colleges – new cuts being announced on the day this book was launched. As Dan Taubman says in his chapter with Mick Fletcher, Norman Lucas and Norman Crowther on the FE workforce, 'the story of staff relations is a narrative of almost unrelieved misery'.

This disillusion is associated with the wider crisis of social democracy that has been elided by the professional project of the Post-16 Centre and which is represented by the contributors to this collection. Like the rest of us, for example, Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours's final chapter – evidently written prior to May 7th this year – concurs with my welcoming of Labour's proposals for HE fees in the last issue of *PSE* (May 2015) in hopes of new local and regional learning infrastructures.

(These would supposedly have been very different from Osborne's elected mayors parachuted into agglomerated Northern 'powerhouses' as what Peter Latham (in an *Imminent Demise* book – *of Local Government* in his case) calls 'the optimal internal

management arrangement for privatised local government services' (2011, p2). Though, strangely, F&HE seems left out of current arrangements, as Johnson Minor, now in charge of HE at DBIS, has lost 'and Cities' from the ministerial designation of his predecessor. (F&HE is also excepted from the arbitrary new layer of bureaucracy running academies.)

So what went wrong?

Personally, like Arnold Weinstock, 'I blame the teachers' who hung on to their precious sixth forms, sustaining parental hopes in what has become academic cramming when Blair backtracked on A-level reform. Instead, the same tedious arguments that began when A-levels were introduced in 1959 as preparation for HE entry are repeated, eg by Morgan 2015!

Many of the approving glances that contributors cast across the border to closer Scots integration of FE and HE, with many more students going on from the former to the latter, rest on five subject highs followed by four-year undergraduate programmes that allow for a foundation year, as in the USA. It's not rocket science!

In England though, teacher intransigence again played its part when Thatcher rejected the recommendations of the MacFarlane report, despite the money it would have saved by bringing together school sixth forms and FE, as Robin Simmons pointed out in another issue of *PSE*. (Simmons is missing from the contributors to this book but his colleague, Kevin Orr, also from Huddersfield – about the only other HEI outside the Institute/UCL with any serious interest in FE – writes informatively with John Greystone and Rob Wye about college governance.)

But these are contingent explanations, like those of many other contributors. They range from, ruling-class prejudice against working-class vocational education (Ann Hodgson, Bill Bailey and Norman Lucas in their chapter on the perennial question *Further than where? Higher than what?*), 'repeated cycles of policy failure' (Mick Fletcher, Julian Gravatt and David Sherlock's chapter on funding, inspection and performance management), or 'pendulum swings in policy', as Geoff Stanton, Andrew Morris and Judith Norrington put it in their curriculum and qualifications chapter, or failures of college leadership according to Tom Jupp.

It is not until the last summary chapter by Hodgson and Spours that 'the long term decline in "youth jobs"' is mentioned as accounting for the repeated failure to revive apprenticeships – now seen as 'the answer to everything' by one of the politicians

Ian Nash and Sue Jones interview in their chapter on 'the politicians' tale'. But these 'apprenticeships' are the latest in what Martin Allen and I have called, also in *PSE*, *Another Great Training Robbery*.

Ewart Keep, who has asked on the Association of Colleges website *What Does Skills Policy Look Like Now the Money has run out?*, is another of 'the feducational community' not represented here. He might also have provided a more than contingent explanation of FE's failure to grow up by pointing out that employers don't really need apprenticeships, or FE either, given the intensification of the UK's 'low skill equilibrium' first characterised by Finegold and Soskice in 1988 to describe England's deregulated, post-industrial and largely service-based economy. Since the collapse of industrial apprenticeships therefore, rebuilding a vocational route with 'parity of esteem' to the traditional academic one has been a lost cause. (See Martin Allen's earlier *PSE* article: 'Why Can't We Do It Like the Germans?')

Nevertheless, suggestions for qualifications reform – along with proposed institutional re-organisations, are favourite activities of professional educationalists as means to extend the social democratic consensus, the idea being that with 'one more push' we can convince policy-makers of the wisdom of our approach. And so, as Ken Roberts concluded his 2011 *Class in Modern Britain*, 'many sociologists continue to act as if modest interventions in education and training will bring about significant redistribution of life-chances'. They won't! Especially now that – as Roberts also points out – the limited upward social mobility of the last century has given way to general downward social mobility in this one.

And yet . . .

As Hodgson and Spours recount, 'Vince Cable's revelation that DBIS officials proposed FE colleges be abolished to save money and no one would notice' (a view shared by many academics) cannot easily be achieved with perhaps five million full and part-time FE students, depending on how you count them – as Adrian Perry and Peter Davies note in their chapter on students. Similarly in HE with perhaps another two and a half million more, despite the incredible fees mess left by HE minister David Willetts!

However, the book does not take account of the growth of what Colin Waugh has called 'nominal HE [which] is being differentiated (for example by the concentration of research funding) into a posh bit that workers pay for from their taxes but from which they are largely excluded as students, and another bit which is increasingly vocationalised and

privatised and also, for those reasons, pushed into what is in effect a single FE (or nominally FHE) sector'.

Here the 1.132 US community colleges (986 of them state-funded, including 31 Native American tribal colleges, plus 115 private not-for-profits) enjoy an historical advantage over their English counterparts, since they have always been indisputably part of the country's higher education system with 40 per cent of its around 12 million undergraduates, including 48 per cent of Black and 58 per cent of Hispanic ones amongst their circa 8 million enrolments (average age 28, 60 per cent part-time).

Clifford Harbour, a long-time community college teacher and administrator, President of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges at Wyoming University, presents an accessible history of the colleges, a description of their current workings and points towards an optimistic future to sustain their 'commitment to open access, the centerpiece of their traditional mission' – like old UK FE. They too face a crisis in their development, however, occasioned by Obama's American Graduation Initiative 'to produce an additional 5 million certificate and degree recipients by 2020' with \$12b federal funding. This the Completion Agenda to which the Community Colleges are central. It is, Harbour reports, tearing the colleges apart 'between their traditional commitment to access and a new expectation of higher completion rates'.

With only 18 per cent of full-time Community College students completing their two-year associate degrees in 2011, Harbour agrees there is no question that the colleges need to improve their graduation rates but he asks: 'is a vision advocating access and completion the best we can imagine?', arguing instead 'that the students, faculty, staff and administrators at community colleges should begin the process of creating their own local community-based movements dedicated to identifying problems, developing community solutions, and reinvigorating democracy'. This is akin to the regional learning infrastructures hoped for by Hodgson and Spours, related to the UK's regional democratic deficit revealed by the Scottish referendum.

The vision of democracy to which Harbour aspires is drawn from John Dewey to whose philosophy his book also provides a useful introduction. 'For Dewey, life in a democracy should be a constant process of identifying real problems, analyzing these problems in view of how they affect our lives, and then experimenting with solutions to solve them.' 'Democracy's colleges', schools and universities are premised for Harbour on the 1946 Truman Commission's recommendation that 'higher

education . . . should be within the grasp of every able American'.

Although Dewey is associated primarily with schools – wrongly, Harbour suggests – this was also Dewey's vision for adults graduating comprehensive High Schools at 18 'so that future workers would not become blindly subject to a fate imposed upon them' with lifelong 'training for occupations through occupations'. 'The problem is not one of adding things on to the present high school. It is a problem of thoroughgoing reconstruction' to develop 'a new urban democratic culture'. Nevertheless, 'Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighbourly community'.

For Harbour, sustaining and developing this is the role of 'The Deweyan community college'. 'Our interactions with students should always involve more than merely preparing them for transfer or employment . . . New reconstructed Deweyan curricula would be a synthesis of vocational and academic curricula . . . preparing students to think critically about the very difficult problems their society is facing'.

Growing income and generational inequality is exacerbated by 'the student loan crisis' with a debt of approximately \$1 trillion, cuts to state funding (in favour of prisons), growth of private provision, including a NewsCorp / Pearson diet of MOOCs and teaching machines, as well as deskilling and automation leaving many under- if not unemployed. Against all this, the Twenty-first Century Commission's *Reclaiming the American Dream* endorses the Completion Agenda by shovelling as many as possible through colleges to universities so as not to 'divert the dream', as Karabel put it, into only nominally HE. Harbour rejects this as an inadequate response which is only going to reinforce 'the public's declining support for higher education'.

Harbour does not want less students since he affirms their right to access and because, as in England, they bring in central funding but it is not clear what he wants the colleges to do with them. Logically, since the fundamental problem is economic, they should provide worthwhile employment through which and for which to learn, not just be certified to go on to the next stage. Some practical examples of Deweyan approaches in the colleges could have substantiated Harbour's inspiring and informative advocacy.