



# Colleges 2020

## Contents and Introduction

Edited by Tony Dolphin and Jonathan Clifton

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# Introduction

*Jonathan Clifton*

The past decade has been good for colleges in Britain, even if there have been some bumps along the way. They received a steady increase in government spending, from £4 billion in 2000 to £6 billion by the end of the decade, and there was considerable investment in staff and neglected buildings (see Gravatt, this volume). In the 2007–8 academic year there were 435 colleges across Britain and together they employed just under 300,000 staff<sup>1</sup> (LLUK 2009a). These staff saw their salaries rise year on year throughout most of the decade.<sup>2</sup>

The decade was also good for the central role of colleges: teaching and learning. The number of learners passing through colleges increased, and in the last academic year there were 4.75 million learners on Learning and Skills Council (LSC)-funded courses in England alone (see Carpentieri and Vorhaus, this volume). The teaching role of colleges has diversified, and they now account for over half of all A-Level provision. Completion and satisfaction rates have also improved. In general, other measures of performance have been positive. The FE college success rate in England in 2007/8 was 80.7 per cent, exceeding the target the Government set for it by 4 per cent. Apprenticeship completions have also exceeded their targets, although there is more work to be done on improving adult skills (Data Service 2010).

While colleges occasionally hit the headlines for the wrong reasons – such as outdated buildings – the picture was generally one of a vibrant sector daring to be optimistic about its future.

However the point of this book is not to look back, but to look forward. For *Colleges 2020*, ippr asked leading practitioners and researchers to lay out where colleges should be in 10 years' time and the challenges they face in getting there. As the chapters were being written the future began to look increasingly uncertain. Economic storm clouds burst overhead; a new skills agenda was released by the Government; college building projects ground to a halt; it was announced that the Learning and Skills Council is to be split up and local authorities are to be given more control over funding; and a surge of young unemployed people registering for courses squeezed resources harder than ever.

While it is easy to focus on the immediate threats colleges face – and they are considerable – changes to British society will also present FE in particular with opportunities:

1. This figure is the number of staff contracts issued by colleges. Some staff may have been issued more than one contract and therefore the figure for actual staff may be slightly lower.

2. Between 2003/4 and 2007/8 female salaries rose by 11.8% and male salaries rose by 8.2% – the difference is due to attempts to narrow the gender pay gap (LLUK 2009b).

- The economic crisis has prompted calls for the UK workforce to improve its skills, especially the technical and practical skills that FE colleges are so well placed to provide.
- People are changing jobs more frequently, meaning adults will require constant training throughout their careers to ensure they keep up with new developments. The training provided by FE colleges could play an important part in this agenda.
- The Government wants every young person to be in education until they are at least 18, and many young people who are unable to find a job are now turning back to college education.
- The fact people are living longer and spending more time in retirement means there will be increased demand for leisure learning.
- International migration will ensure colleges have a role both in preparing students for a global labour market, and in helping to foster community cohesion in our diverse towns and cities.

It is against this context of threats and opportunities that our authors set out their recommendations for *Colleges 2020*.

### **Colleges and the economy**

An immediate economic concern for colleges is the future of funding. In Chapter 1 Julian Gravatt notes that the first decade of the millennium was a good one for colleges – with real increases in funding and investment in infrastructure. The next decade will be tougher, with the likelihood of spending cuts and increased competition from other skills providers. Gravatt points out that these cuts will be spread unevenly across the functions that colleges perform, with some areas better protected than others, and posits what budget cuts might mean for colleges – with fee increases, staff cuts, and college mergers all on the cards. But it is not just tighter government spending that will challenge funding streams. The current centralised funding model is likely to come under attack from local councils as they are given more responsibility for colleges. Changes to the curriculum and qualifications that colleges offer will also alter how funding is organised. But Gravatt believes that, while funding will be a struggle over the next decade, recent improvements mean the sector is better placed than ever to deal with the challenges it has to face.

The financial crisis and subsequent recession have led to a reassessment of the type of skills and businesses that are needed to support the UK economy. The main political parties are united in their belief that small businesses will be central to future growth and ‘rebalancing’ of the economy. Business enterprise is set to be a central economic policy goal over the coming decade and in Chapter 2 Terry Warburton makes the case for colleges having an important role to play in developing the necessary skills. He provides a number of case studies to show how colleges have set about this task – including weaving enterprise education into the curriculum and extra-curricular activities, training staff and managers to deliver it, and working with local businesses and entrepreneurs to provide more ‘real world’

experience. But he argues that colleges can also use their capacity and infrastructure to more directly support business start-up, by incubating new businesses and coordinating networks of entrepreneurs.

### **Colleges and the community**

While it is tempting in the current economic climate to focus just on the role of colleges in developing skills for the labour market, in Chapter 3 J.D. Carpentieri and John Vorhaus remind us of the college's wider social value. They argue that, because it is hard to quantify the broad social impact of colleges, much of what FE achieves is overlooked and unrecognised. The result is that policymakers expect too much from colleges in economic terms, and too little attention is paid to what they contribute in other areas. Adult learning is associated with increased life satisfaction, self-esteem, self-efficacy and improved health. Colleges can help build social capital and networks of friends, which are a valuable source of support. These benefits are seen across all types of college course – vocational, academic and leisure – and this leads the authors to take issue with government ministers who attach little importance to learning for leisure. The challenge over the next decade, then, is to convince policymakers to take note of the benefits colleges bring beyond simply the economic ones, by finding a way to measure the broad range of outcomes they deliver. This might be tough when the government department responsible for FE is focused on business and the economy.

Colleges can also help the UK manage increasingly diverse communities. International migration has become an intrinsic feature of British life over recent decades, and in Chapter 4 Jill Rutter argues that flows of people in and out of the UK provide a number of challenges for colleges, including students having varied English language skills and a wide range of educational backgrounds. There are three areas where colleges will play an important role in the next decade. First, they can aid the integration of migrants by providing them with language training, skills and social contacts that are essential to help them settle. Second, they can foster social cohesion by bringing people together from diverse groups and facilitating grassroots discussion about migration. Third, they can prepare their students for a global labour market in which many of them might expect to travel overseas. Rutter ends by reminding us that many college courses are already dependent on the fees from international students and that the ability of colleges to recruit students from overseas will determine, in part, whether or not they remain competitive in the future.

### **Teaching, learning and the built environment**

In Chapter 5 our attention is turned to teaching and learning. Alan Brown adds three further challenges to those facing colleges in the next decade. First, in our knowledge-based economy and ageing society teaching methods will have to reflect the importance of lifelong learning. Education should be less about jumping through hoops to achieve qualifications, and more about constant gradual development to update skills. Second, colleges will have to reconcile the growth of technology with their teaching and learning aims. Brown cautions that while technology can enhance

learning by providing access to resources and connecting learners into networks of support, it is not an end in itself. Third, Brown argues that more attention should be paid to the social and emotional dimensions of learning. Every classroom has a different culture depending on the relationships between tutors, students and peers, and therefore tutors should be given more freedom and control over how they achieve the desired outcomes. Taken together, this amounts to a fresh direction for teaching and learning in the coming years.

Tight public finances will inevitably mean reduced capital expenditure on colleges over the next decade. In Chapter 6 John Bryan argues that this should not be used as an excuse to ignore the physical design of colleges. Just like good teaching, good buildings can improve results and help colleges to attract students in an increasingly competitive environment. Over the next decade the college estate will also have to incorporate new methods of teaching, increased use of ICT and improved environmental sustainability. Bryan acknowledges that these are big demands on college principals as they plan their estates for 2020, demands that are made more daunting by the drying-up of funds to achieve them. He therefore maps out the priorities for college design to help focus minds on the most important tasks, identifying how resources could be freed up through using facilities more intensively, new procurement methods, and combining certain functions. However, he cautions against taking the easy option of selling up and moving to cheaper locations out of town, because colleges need to be easily accessible to people from all walks of life and to adults who combine studying with their jobs.

### **From the local to the global**

It is a common mistake to treat colleges as a homogenous set of institutions, focusing on their aggregate impact at a national level. But the sector is diverse and includes general FE, specialist, sixth form and tertiary colleges. In Chapter 7 John Widdowson reminds us that it is at the local level that the true benefits of the diversity of FE colleges are most keenly felt, and that they often enjoy a better reputation locally than the sector does as a whole nationally. Analysis of the economic impact colleges have on their local area demonstrates they are a good investment – creating jobs, spending money, helping to regenerate neighbourhoods and providing skills training tailored to local needs. Colleges can also play an important role in building community cohesion and in providing resources and facilities that the wider community can use. As the UK continues its shift towards a knowledge-based economy and multicultural society, colleges will be important drivers in shaping local places. But if FE is to tackle the bewildering array of tasks it is given (such as preparing students for higher education, technical training, adult skills development and building community cohesion) then it cannot do it alone. Colleges will have to develop ways to work with other local bodies to achieve common goals, including employers, business sector groups, schools, universities, faith groups, local councils and regional bodies. While colleges have always had strong roots in their local communities, the ability to work in partnership with a host of other organisations will be essential for their success in coming years.

Chapter 8 provides an international perspective. Writing from the USA, Kevin Dougherty reviews how the much lauded American community college system can be a source of both inspiration and caution for the UK because it shares many aims with FE colleges in Britain. Of particular interest to a UK audience, where more sixth form students are now educated in colleges than in schools, is how community colleges have helped their students transition to higher education. Dougherty goes on to outline innovative ways to help students who need special attention in order to ‘catch up’ to the academic standard of colleges, including attempts by colleges to intervene early, working with nearby high schools to improve the skills of their students. But after reviewing the success of community colleges in a number of areas, Dougherty points out that challenges remain – such as inequalities in spending, poor academic success and patchy results for adult and community education. This serves as a reminder that no approach can simply be imported wholesale from overseas, but rather it should be used as a spark for new thinking about common problems.

### **The view from outside**

In Chapter 9, by way of a conclusion, ippr’s Tony Dolphin presents an outsider’s view of the challenges facing colleges over the next decade and how they might shape the sector and the nature of individual colleges in 2020. He focuses in a little more depth on the funding challenge raised by Julian Gravatt and highlights how cuts in spending on FE are likely to be sustained for several years. He also considers how changes in the structure of the economy will require a major contribution from colleges as deliverers of a skilled workforce and suggests that, if resources are stretched, this might lead to reduced provision of leisure classes. These trends, he argues, will tend to push colleges in the direction of becoming more focused, but also more commercial operations. The risk, therefore, is that while colleges gain a clarity of purpose, they will lose some of their connections with their local communities.

The next decade will see colleges in the UK being given less money and being expected to do more than ever with it. Their role in providing skills to the economy will be vital if the UK is to remain competitive in the global economy but they will also want to maintain their links with the local community. They will have to be flexible enough to adapt to big challenges while striving to gain a reputation for excellence. Colleges in 2020 will be different from the colleges of today. Here are some pointers to the possible nature of those differences.

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