

Please cite the Published Version

Lloyd, Catherine and Wolstencroft, Peter  (2025) Potential realised or an opportunity missed? Twenty years since the Foster report. Research in Post-Compulsory Education. ISSN 1359-6748

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2025.2550850>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/641935/>

Usage rights:  [Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Additional Information: This is an author accepted manuscript of an article published in Research in Post-Compulsory Education, by Taylor & Francis. This version is deposited with a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 licence [<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>], in accordance with Man Met's Research Publications Policy. The version of record can be found on the publisher's website.

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

Potential realised or an opportunity missed? 20 years since the Foster Report.

Catherine Lloyd, The Bedford College Group, clloyd@bedford.ac.uk

Peter Wolstencroft, Manchester Metropolitan University

Abstract:

This paper considers the 2005 Foster Report on the future of Further Education in England and its modern-day legacy. Commissioned in 2004 by the then Labour Government, the report aimed to provide greater certainty for the sector regarding the future direction of travel and also to help it prepare for the challenges it may face in the subsequent decade. Its key points: the need for greater clarity, improved leadership and management and a relentless focus on the needs of learners and businesses, resulted in 80 recommendations. In a speech to the Association of Colleges conference in 2005 the then Chief Inspector of schools said, ‘it may be that in 15 or 20 years we shall look back and reflect that this was it: this was the moment that we got post-16 right’. On the 20th anniversary of the report’s release, we explore how the vocational landscape has changed in the intervening years. Rather than experiencing a period of continuity the sector has been beset by ongoing policy churn and new initiatives. In light of this continued uncertainty, we reflect on Foster’s vision for the future of the sector, consider what progress has been made since 2005 and question whether the recommendations made in the report still have relevance today.

Key Words: Further Education, Vocational Education, Policy, Skills, Foster

Introduction:

Further Education in England

Within the United Kingdom (UK), education, training and skills has been designated as a devolved policy area and therefore each administration is able to implement policy relevant to the landscape in which they operate. This means that there are a number of key differences and for that reason, this study focuses on the Further Education sector in England rather than the UK in general. The sector has become notorious for being difficult to define, but for the purposes of this article we will use the definition provided by Jameson and Hillier (2003, 2), who describe it as ‘Educational provision for post-compulsory education age learners at sub-degree level in a range of post-16, adult and extra-mural education and training institutions’. As this definition suggests, the provision is extremely diverse and ranges from full time study programmes and specialist vocational provision through to part time adult courses and apprenticeships. Whilst it is always important to view the sector in heterogeneric terms, the provision’s overarching aim is to support individuals to gain the skills and qualifications they need to progress into employment or further study. Although there are few direct comparisons, most countries have institutions which deliver vocational education and training, community colleges in America or TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) in Australia for example.

Whilst education as a sector in England is no stranger to policy churn (Silverwood and Wolstencroft 2023), further education has been particularly impacted. To put this in context, since the 1980s there have been 28 major pieces of legislation related to vocational, FE and skills training, six different ministerial departments with overall responsibility for education

and 48 secretaries of state with relevant responsibilities (Norris and Adam 2017). This constant change of leadership has not helped with the churn of policies, with stays in the Secretary of State role ranging from over four years to a mere 35 hours. This has led to ‘frequent shifts in qualifications, funding models and back and fore between central and devolved planning’ (Dabbous, Patel and Percy 2020, 12). The result is a situation where providers have had to become used to endless change (Jephcote, Salisbury and Rees, 2008) and perpetually reinvent themselves in the light of the latest policy (Smith and O’Leary, 2013). A situation which has been referred to by Keep (2006, 47) as policymakers ‘playing with the biggest train set in the world’. This turbulence results in changes within organisations as they restructure and adapt to meet new requirements, a process described by Smith and O’Leary (2013) as continual reinvention. Questions have been raised about how FE colleges can be led, changed and improved within such an unstable environment (Elliott, 2015), something that with the election of a new government in Britain in 2024 is likely to continue.

In England, the Government can direct individuals or organisations to undertake reviews of areas of key interest to them. The results are published and may include recommendations intended to change or improve practice, they may also contribute to white papers, which are policy documents that are used to outline future legislation. Notable reviews in the last 20 years include the Wolf Report (2011) which encompassed a review of 14-19 Vocational Education, the Lingfield Report (2012) into Professionalism in the sector, the Sainsbury Review (2016) of Technical Education and the Augar Review (2019) into Post-18 Education.

The key figure in this article is Sir Andrew Foster, a British public servant who was knighted in 2001 for services to the health and government services. Prior to undertaking the review of FE, he spent ten years in a regulatory role as chief executive of the Audit Commission for

England and Wales. Foster had considerable experience of conducting regulatory reviews and Kingston (2005a) reported at the time that ‘according to one person who has worked with him, he [*Foster*] has a gift for getting straight to the nub of things’.

The Foster Review of Further Education

The Foster Review of Further Education (commonly known as the ‘Foster Report’) was commissioned in November 2004 by the then Labour government as part of their agenda to reform 14-19 education in England. The intention of the review was to identify issues raised by the agenda, provide greater certainty for the sector and map out whether it was ready for the challenges and opportunities anticipated in the future. The final report was published a year later in November 2005. The report was titled ‘Realising the potential: the future role of FE colleges’, partly in response to concerns expressed that the sector was currently underachieving. In the foreword, Foster explains that ‘the aim was to identify the distinctive contribution FE colleges make to their local economies and to social inclusion, their particular mission, and what needs to happen to transform them’ (Foster 2005, v). To aid this transformation the report set out 80 recommendations, split between what he termed imperatives (of which there were 22) and supporting recommendations (the remaining 58). Recommendations were assigned to various categories but there were two overarching priorities: colleges had to acquire a much clearer sense of purpose, and they must adopt a tighter, more effective approach to improvement (Kingston 2005b).

Initial reaction to the report was positive with then Secretary of State for Education, Ruth Kelly, addressing the Association of Colleges (AoC) conference and proclaiming that ‘I think it is an excellent report. It sets out clearly and convincingly the priorities we must address. It

challenges the government and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to respond just as it challenges colleges to respond' (Kelly 2005). Away from the official governmental response, reaction was broadly supportive, although not all commentators were as enthusiastic as the government response. The Learning and Skills Council, whilst welcoming the Report, downplayed the transformative nature of the report by describing it as 'useful' (Gavin, 2005).

It is important to note that the Foster Report did not occur in isolation. In 2004 the Government asked Lord Leitch to undertake an independent review of skills to 'inform Government's ambitions for improving human capital in order to increase productivity, growth and benefits to society', (Foster 2005, 7). The subsequent Review of Skills (Leitch 2006) focused on the skills needed for the twenty-first century and had considerable overlap with the Foster Report.

The Changing Vocational Landscape

For decades the FE sector has had a focus on deregulation, economic liberalism and open markets (Naz 2023), something that tends to be classified as a neoliberalist approach. Alongside this has been a growth in managerialism, with a reliance on data and metrics, performance targets and accountability. This focus is often traced back to the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which was described as a 'pivotal juncture in the development of FE' (Baldwin, Raven and Webber-Jones 2022, 16) resulting in incorporation, a process where colleges became independent bodies, moving away from being funded by local authorities, to a centralised funding council. According to Naz (2003, 4) incorporation was 'an inevitable consequence of the continuation of neoliberal policies'. This move resulted in major changes in the way colleges were funded, managed and organised (Simmons 2010), with a shift to commercial concerns and financial imperatives (Baldwin, Raven and Webber-Jones 2022). This led to 'policy-driven competitive and highly marketized behaviours across the sector'

(Spours et al 2020, 352). Funding for individual students was reduced, and funding methodology changes drove colleges to increase recruitment, retention and achievement to ensure courses remained financially viable (Lucas 2004). Colleges used the language and practices of the market (Baldwin, Raven and Webber-Jones 2022) with college Principals now rebranded as CEOs whose roles increasingly focused on financial and performance management (Naz 2023). Ball (2003) noted that performativity was the dominant culture in the sector in the decade following incorporation which was evident when the Foster report was commissioned.

When reviewing the Report, it is relevant to consider the scale of the sector and how it has changed in the intervening period since its publication. The FE sector in England currently comprises a wide range of different providers including general FE colleges and specialist colleges whose focus is on a narrow part of the curriculum. When the Foster Report was produced in 2005 there were 388 colleges (comprising 250 GFE colleges, 100 Sixth Forms, 22 Specialist and 16 Specialist designated /adult institutions), and approximately 3 million students. By contrast, in October 2024 there were 218 colleges in England comprising 157 general FE colleges (GFE), 39 sixth forms, ten land-based colleges, ten specialist designated colleges and two Art, Design and Performing Arts Colleges, and a combined 1.6 million students (AoC 2024).

Perhaps the most striking factor is the significant decrease in the number of organisations, which has been driven by external factors relating largely to finance. A report from the National Audit Office (NAO, 2015) showed that the financial health of the FE sector has been in decline since 2010-11 and almost half of colleges were in deficit in 2013-14. In response to this the Department for Education working jointly with the Department for Business,

Innovation and Skills, facilitated a programme of post-16 area-based reviews to provide opportunities for institutions to restructure their provision to meet the changing context and achieve maximum impact. The aim was to ensure institutions were financially stable and able to deliver high quality provision, with a report at the time stating ‘we will need to move towards fewer, often larger, more resilient and efficient providers’ (DBIS 2015, 3). By August 2017 these area reviews had recommended 57 college mergers and did go some way to limit the financial deterioration of the sector, with the Government providing financial help to cover the cost of mergers (NAO 2020). However, the financial health of the sector has been an ongoing concern in recent years, in February 2020 it was reported that the government was intervening in nearly half of colleges for financial health reasons. Despite the increased scrutiny on finances and the mergers detailed above, the figure related to the number of colleges in deficit has stayed fairly stable in the last ten years with the most recent figures showing that 37% of colleges were in deficit (Moura and Tahir 2024). The fact remains that the sector is under significant pressures with ongoing uncertainties. Some have suggested that the area-based reviews marked the transition to a ‘Post-Incorporation Model’ (Hodgson and Spours 2015), and that ‘march of marketisation has been partially undermined by a range of financial, policy and political factors that have placed increased emphasis on strategies of collaboration and coordination’ Spours et al (2020, 353).

Another striking statistic is that the number of students participating in further education has halved, which has also impacted on the funding that colleges receive. In the intervening years colleges have been squeezed by declining student numbers, reduced central spending and the rising cost of living. At the time of the Foster Report the majority of students in FE were adults studying on a part time basis, and in the years preceding 2003/04 there had been considerable growth in learners over 60 years of age. This halving in student number that occurred post-

Foster was largely due to the reduction in spending on adult skills of 45% between 2009/10 and 2017/18 (Augar, 2019).

Many of the organisations and sector bodies named in the report have been dissolved or superseded in the intervening 20 years. As an example many of the 80 recommendations within the report were aimed specifically at the role of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). This was abolished in 2008 and replaced by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) for adult learners and the Education Funding Agency (EFA) for 16–19-year-old learners. By 2017 these two organisations had merged to create the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). This churn of agencies adds to a landscape which lacks stability for the sector.

In conclusion the structure of the sector, the number of students it serves, and its regulation have all changed considerably in the intervening 20 years. However, despite these changes there is much about the current sector that Foster would recognise.

Rationale for study

In a speech to the AoC conference in 2005, commenting on the Foster Report, the then Chief Inspector of schools said, ‘it may be that in 15 or 20 years we shall look back and reflect that this was it: this was the moment that we got post-16 right’. This paper reflects on Foster’s vision for the future of the sector and considers what progress has been made since 2005. We ask the question whether the recommendations made in the report are still relevant today and discuss whether Foster’s vision has become a reality. Given the positive response it was greeted with at the time, there should have been no valid reasons why it was not implemented, so given that many of the areas Foster raises are still being discussed, we look at what has happened to Foster’s vision.

Given the wide scope of the review and the significant number of recommendations, this article will focus on the key areas arising from it, using the imperatives and recommendations to illustrate our argument. One key theme running through the report was that the sector needed to prepare for the future and so, on the twentieth anniversary of the report, we believe it is a good time to revisit the recommendations made and see what has happened post-Foster. Did the sector realise its potential or was it a missed opportunity for change?

Methodology

The article has utilised desk-based research to ascertain the impact of the report. This approach has been used for three key reasons. Firstly, the scope of the report would mean that the population needing to be interviewed would be significant. The diversity of the sector means that any interviews used would need to reflect the views of the entire sector to ensure validity and this undertaking would be beyond the scope of this article. Secondly, the purpose of this article is to review what came after the Foster Report and in the view of the authors, this is best done using a wide variety of sources which are available online. By reviewing all documents associated with the report, a balanced view can be gained. Finally, given the passage of time, asking about motivation and thoughts regarding the review is likely to incur problems associated with revisionism and also problems caused by the passage of time. Even more neutral commentators are likely to struggle to recall motivations and thoughts from two decades previously and hence using archival research removes the need to rely on the memory of those close to the report.

Following an in-depth analysis of the Foster Report, consideration was given to the changes to the FE landscape over the last 20 years. This was done by comparing the data presented in

appendix 1 of the report with that published annually by the Association of Colleges to provide context to the study. Reviewing policy documents, reports and reviews of the sector since 2005 enabled the identification of recurring themes; this encompassed vocational and technical education as both can be used when describing FE. Neoliberalism, identified as the hegemonic political ideology during the period has been used as a lens through which to view the report and the policy decisions made in the intervening decades.

Findings and Discussion

This section begins by reviewing Foster's vision for the future of FE and comparing this with subsequent visions, identifying areas of commonality and reviewing ongoing issues defining the purpose of the sector. This is followed by a consideration of the progress made since 2005 in some of the key areas identified by Foster. It concludes by reflecting on the relevance of Foster's recommendations to the current FE sector.

Foster's vision for the sector

The Foster report and the vision it sets out is clearly influenced by neoliberalism and the growth in managerialism in the sector in the previous decade. Within the report there is a focus on the FE 'market', funding and performance management and monitoring of standards, with the term 'value for money' appearing 30 times. The report begins with Foster's vision which was for the sector to realise its potential and be responsive to 'learners, societal and economic needs' (Foster 2005, 2). This, he explained, could be achieved through actions such as looking ahead and responding to changing imperatives, delivering skills the economy, businesses and individuals need and working in partnership with businesses and other providers. This vision was influenced by the need to maximise peoples' potential to develop world class knowledge and skills which would contribute to future economic prosperity and secure the UK's place in

the global economy. Throughout the report Foster emphasised three key values: ‘the need for greater clarity, improved leadership, organisation and management in the sector and a relentless focus on the needs of learners and business’ (Foster 2005, vii).

The first of Foster’s 80 recommendations required colleges to ‘review how they compare against the description of the FE college of the future and act on the outcome’ (Foster 2005, 71) with the intention of moving the sector closer to achieving the vision. This linked directly to the first imperative which was that ‘GFEC and tertiary colleges should adopt as their primary purpose, improving employability and supplying economically valuable skills (Ibid, 71). It was suggested that to assist in this process colleges should look at their mission statements and realign them with a focus on skills.

In 2011, just six years after the Foster Report, and following a change in government, the Skills Minister, John Hayes, expressed the need for a reformed FE sector and proposed ‘a new future for FE that is characterised by innovation, vocational excellence and a renewed sense of enthusiasm for and pride in skills’ (Hayes 2011). The focus was similar, the skills needed to drive the economy, the greater role that needed to be played by employers and the need to address poor delivery of provision. Echoing Foster, the term ‘world class skills’ was used again set against the need to compete in a global economy. This informed the Government’s Skills for Sustainable Growth Strategy which included 23 recommendations for the sector as to how this growth would be achieved (DBIS 2010). The Wolf report (2011) which comprised a review of vocational education was intended to simplify the system, implementing changes to funding and accountability which in turn would lead to better education and training and opportunities for progression for young people through the implementation of 27 recommendations. This was followed by the Sainsbury Review (2016) a panel put together to

advise ministers on measures to improve technical education in England, with the aim of ‘ensuring individuals develop the technical knowledge and skills industry needs’. It cited the current lack of intermediate skills in the workforce and the resulting impact on productivity. The resulting report identified 34 recommendations to achieve what was referred to as a fundamental shift in technical education.

Fast forward another four years and in 2020 a report commissioned by The College Alliance on the ‘college of the future’ was focused on ‘people, productivity and place’ and presented a new vision for colleges focussing on their civic role. This would include support for employers to drive business change and innovation and for colleges to play an even greater role in fostering healthy and connected communities. There were 11 recommendations as opposed to Foster’s rather ambitious 80, but there are similarities in focus and priorities. Foster would certainly have recognised the content of the recommendations which included the need for a ‘new strategic partnership with employers’. It appears, learners, societal and economic (Foster 2005) imperatives have been redefined as people, productivity and place (College Alliance 2020).

Bringing this up to date, the current government’s vision for FE aims to ‘transform the way FE engages with both government and local communities, making it a central player in building a prosperous, skills-rich nation’ (Parrett 2024). The Government is in the process of establishing a body referred to as Skills England whose role is to bring together key players involved in meeting the skills needs of the next decade and whose strategy sets out their vision to produce a ‘high-skill high-productivity workforce’ (DfE 2024, 8). These visions share many similarities and unsurprisingly they all focus on skills, but there seems to be very short-lived memory of what has gone before. This was identified by Norris and Adam (2017, 9) who

acknowledge this poor institutional memory, their analysis found that for those in government it was ‘difficult to access information about the initiatives and policies that have been tried before’ which could result in past initiatives being recreated. Foster identified at the time of writing the review that FE had suffered from too many initiatives (Foster 2005); this is not helped by the churn of senior leaders identified by the authors in a previous article (Lloyd and Wolstencroft, 2022) whereby expertise is lost as principals leave their posts after relatively brief periods in charge. This constant change leaves very little time to implement the previous vision before it is being relaunched, as a result Foster’s vision for the sector still has relevance today.

Links have been drawn between the economic needs of the country and FE from the 1960s onwards (Naz 2023), the inference being there is a ‘direct causal relationship between levels of education, training and economic success’ (Simmons 2010, 370). This has driven successive governments to focus on FE as a way to address perceived skills deficits through better serving the needs of employers and by implication become more competitive in a global market. This is evident in the visions detailed in successive reports. It has been suggested that the introduction of area-based reviews could be seen as an admission that marketized and competitive logic driving policy has so far failed to produce a sector that is sufficiently responsive to employer needs (Spours et al 2020). Naz (2023, 6) comments that the ‘marketized model of education seems to have been less efficient than expected in terms of meeting the needs of the market’.

The Foster Report considers that one of the issues hindering progress was that the sector ‘lacked a clearly recognised and shared core purpose’ (Foster 2005, vii) he explained that ‘there are no fully shared views on the purposes of an FE college and this must be rectified’ (Ibid, 13). This gave rise to the recommendation that ‘Government should promote widely the clear purpose and strong brand for FE linked to the skills mission and there needs to be a long-term

consistency in this promotion’ (Foster 2005, 77). These debates about the position of FE within the wider education system and its purpose are enduring. The 1997 Kennedy Report identified what is referred to as a throwaway definition ‘Further education is everything that does not happen in schools or universities’ (Kennedy 1997, 1). Over a decade later, the sector according to Page (2011, 101) remained the ‘educational Other to schools and universities’ constantly wrestling to maintain a distinct identity. This is perhaps because as the Augar (2019, 124) Report identified, further education colleges have become ‘providers of everything to everyone’. An admirable aim but one that clearly causes significant problems when trying to talk about the sector as a whole. Foster referred to the sector as being positioned within Government as the ‘disadvantaged middle child’ between schools and Higher Education. This description is long established, but it is important to nuance this. Beighton (2021) talks about this being relevant from a political perspective where the sector is not one that is often used to influence votes, whilst Playfair (2023) talks about how this is not helpful in reclaiming professionalism in the sector. What is clear in recent literature is that Foster’s positioning has been challenged in the twenty years since he wrote about the ‘middle child’. However, the situation remains that ‘Further Education can be a confusing term for public debate’ (Dabbous, Patel and Percy 2020, 5). This is clearly an area which is yet to be fully resolved and therefore could still be a hinderance to progress in achieving Foster’s original vision.

Progress made since 2005

The recommendations made by Foster were broad and covered all aspects of FE from its purpose and management through to the funding, resourcing and delivery of the curriculum. The recommendations were targeted not only at colleges but also at Government and the key sector bodies at the time such as the Learning and Skills Council. It is not possible to consider

each of the 80 recommendations individually, therefore key areas which have been the focus of attention in the intervening 20 years have been selected for discussion, including leadership, the FE workforce, engagement with employers and funding. Challenges that have been consistent over the past 20 years and that remain relevant in the current FE landscape are of particular interest here.

Leadership

Foster identified that achieving the vision presented in his report would require dynamic leaders and a purposeful, skilled, professional and inspiring workforce. He identified the need for a new generation of leaders, whose attributes should include the ability to be passionate, optimistic, high energy, engaging and inspiring, someone who could ‘constantly scan the environment and policy agenda, anticipate change and innovate to meet its demands’ (Foster 2005, 4). Considering the environment they would be working in this last statement is perhaps the most valid. Foster considered that the leaders should be brought in from outside the sector and made a recommendation to ‘devise a programme to recruit and train 50 new senior middle managers a year from other sectors’ (Foster 2005, 79). It is not clear how the figure of 50 was arrived at, or what positions senior middle managers would hold within colleges, there is also no further suggestion as to how this programme might operate. Whilst there are now a number of training programmes for middle and senior leaders in the FE sector, as Jupp (2014, 190) says ‘there is no evidence that suggests successful principals come from any particular background’ therefore professional development is key. The lack of success in attracting people from outside the sector can be illustrated when looking at the backgrounds of current college principals; 99% come from within the sector (Lloyd and Wolstencroft 2022). 15 years after Foster, The College Alliance (2020, 16) reported that the sector required ‘diverse and representative systems leaders’ echoing Foster’s earlier work.

The FE Workforce

There have been ongoing discussions around the FE workforce in the 20 years since Foster undertook his review. Foster identified the need for a purposeful, skilled, professional and inspiring workforce. This linked to the imperative that ‘the Government, with the AoC and FE colleges and other key stakeholders, should develop a clear and targeted workforce development plan within the next twelve months which is published and consulted on prior to implementation’ (Foster 2005, 79). This development plan should include improve continued professional development, address skills shortages and tackle pay. Seven years later the Lingfield Report (2012) on Professionalism in Further Education tried to address some of the issues around the professionalisation of the workforce, with a focus on development of pedagogical and subject expertise however noted that ‘the average salaries of FE staff had declined substantially over time’ and suggested that this would ‘have an impact on FE lecturers professional sense of self-worth’ (Lingfield 2012, 32). Augar (2019, 128) identified that ‘recruitment of a high-quality workforce is challenging for many FE colleges’. In 2020 a report from the Edge Foundation on the future of further education highlighted the workforce recruitment and retention crisis and identified the need for an ambitious future workforce strategy (Dabbous, Patel and Percy 2020), something which echoed Foster. Bringing things up to date, a recent ETF report (Maylor, Smith and Tulley 2024) states the need to solve recruitment and retention issues, offer clear professional pathways and high-quality professional development; it also mentions tackling pay. All themes that can be traced back to before the Foster Report, with Naz (2023, 12) describing how funding mechanisms post-incorporation meant colleges ‘were unable to afford industry specialists to who could teach on their vocational courses’ a challenge that endures to this day.

The role of employers

Foster identified a greater role for employers, as he suggested that ‘too many employers do not believe that they can get from FE colleges training of the design, delivery and quality they need’ (Foster 2005, 8). He hoped to address this through recommendations to colleges to improve their offer to employers, for example the imperative that; ‘FE colleges should look at what more they need to do to improve their offer to employers both through their primary role in improving the pool of employability and skills and in response to specific employer needs (Ibid, 72). It was acknowledged that further work needed to be done to improve engagement between employers and colleges, to identify gaps in the supply and demand for skills. Move forward six years, Hayes (2011) claimed that the system was failing to meet the needs of employers and suggested that there was no point in ‘listening passively to employers’ complaints when the skills system fails to meet their needs’, he aimed to address this by driving through increased numbers of apprenticeships. However, it is clear the intended aim has still not been achieved in this area, as Mason (2020) reports that ‘the current education and training system in the UK is failing to meet many skills needs, particularly in relation to intermediate skills’. In part this is down to a funding mechanism that focuses on full time students, but it also suggests that there persists a disconnect between employers and colleges, something that is reinforced by the slow take up of T-Levels, a qualification that was conceived to help bridge the gap between academic study and employment. The latest figures show that just over 7,000 students obtained a T level, representing less than 1% of the total population of 18-year-olds eligible to take the qualification (HMSO 2024).

Funding

Progress has also been hampered by funding. Augar (2019, 119) identified that ‘funding is a fundamental challenge in FE’ and his report acknowledged that whilst there have been a few

reviews of the sector, ‘nothing much has happened except for a steep, steady decline in funding’. One of the key findings is a report published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (Sibieta and Tahir 2021, 2) highlighted that ‘funding per student aged 16–18 fell by over 11% in real terms between 2010–11 and 2020–21 in further education and sixth-form colleges’. In addition, colleges are coping with ‘increasingly complex funding formulae for different income streams’ (NAO 2020, 8) and this can drive them to deliver provision for financial rather than educational reasons. Augar (2019) found that the funding regime in colleges had restricted their operations and the ability to innovate or plan for the long term. In part, this focus on funding can be traced back to the Foster Report. The year after its publication, the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee concluded that ‘catastrophic mismanagement’ of the funding related to the capital project meant to help colleges implement many of the changes needed had taken place and this meant that many projects were curtailed or not started, putting more pressure on the sector (IUSSC, 2009). A long-standing issue, ‘the primary crisis in FE has always been linked to finance’ (Naz 2023, 12), funding continues to present challenges for the sector. These issues will not be easily resolved, according to Huddleston and Unwin (2024, 8), ‘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’.

Relevance of the recommendations

One of Foster’s overarching priorities was to create an effective approach to improvement which would help the sector to realise its potential. ‘Long-term continuous improvement’ was identified as something all colleges should be aiming for, through the imperative intended to create ‘a continued drive to improve quality and achieve excellence’ (Foster 2005, 72). This is another recurring theme as Maylor, Smith and Tully (2024) also refer to the need for FE to be a sustainable system capable of continuously improving its practices. It is hard to argue that

the sector should not be striving for continuous improvement, however, it is important to consider the impact of the landscape in which the sector operates. There will always be a need for the sector to be agile and responsive to changes in demographics, skills needs and economic pressures, and to address ‘challenges both perennial and new’ (Maylor, Smith and Tulley 2024). As Orr (2020, 512) explains, ‘colleges are very good at absorbing change and coping with instability’ however this leads to colleges to focus on coping strategies, which is not a situation that allows vocational education and training to thrive.

In the report, Foster suggested the need for a dedicated, time limited, implementation group to immediately start working on his recommendations. This never came to fruition and therefore with a change in government and the short-termist approach described, the sector moved on to the next priority. Clearly there are recommendations in the report that have less application in today’s sector, and these mostly concern funding and quality bodies that have long since ceased to exist. However, in many cases the spirit of the recommendations for example in terms of capital funding and development of infrastructure and the college estate remain relevant.

In the last 20 years there has been no shortage of recommendations for the sector. The problem appears to be that there is little time for reflection on one set of recommendations before another set comes along. This is not to detract from their individual value or relevance, but as the City and Guilds (2014) report on policy making highlighted there is a need to understand the historical context to improve future policy making, which Norris and Adam (2017) refer to as strengthening institutional memory. Despite the ongoing churn since the report was published, it is possible to identify constants within policy objectives such as ‘the aim to make the sector more responsive to the demands of the labour market’ (Ibid, 9). This is evident in the language of successive visions for the sector and the relentless focus on skills. Whilst the focus has

shifted from a lack of skills to that of a skills gap (Avis 2018) the narrative is one that would have been familiar when the review was commissioned.

Conclusion

This paper initially asked the question whether the Foster Report was potential realised or an opportunity missed. As we reach the 20-year anniversary of its publication, are we looking back and thinking, ‘this is the time we got FE right’? In hindsight, Sir Andrew Foster’s review of the future of Further Education colleges answered many of the questions set of it even before the final report was published in 2005. In the foreword, the author, whilst describing the sector, talks about how its heterogeneity makes it difficult to bring the essence and reform imperatives of this vital public service into focus (Foster, 2005, v). This sector diversity is a common theme throughout the report and echoes Jameson’s (2013, 15) description of the sector as the ‘yes...but...and...’ sector in recognition of the difficulties commentators had in defining it. The Foster Report sought to identify a common understanding of the challenges for colleges and the opportunities that could be taken to ensure the sector thrived. Yet Foster’s comments about the heterogenic nature of the sector meant that finding common answers was always likely to prove a challenge. Whilst its key points; the need for greater clarity, improved leadership, organisation and management in the sector and a relentless focus on the needs of learners and business (Foster 2005) are broad enough to cover all aspects of the sector, their lack of specificity raises questions about their overall usefulness, a point reinforced by the fact that since then a number of subsequent reports have also been commissioned looking into the future of the sector. Foster (2005, v) believed that his report offered ‘a major opportunity for the FE colleges to take hold of their future and fully realise their potential to the benefit of all’. Dabbous, Patel and Percy (2020, 21) explain that due to a ‘lack of stability in both policy and funding, the FE sector has struggled to dictate the direction of its own future’. Perhaps in light

of this lack of ability to dictate the direction, many of Foster's 80 recommendations do still have relevance to the current sector and on reflection on the intervening 20 years, the report must be considered a missed opportunity for change.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

AoC (Association of Colleges). 2024. *College Key Facts 2024/25*, London: AoC

Augar, P. 2019. *Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-18-review-of-education-and-funding-independent-panel-report>

Avis, J. 2018. Crossing Boundaries: VET, the Labour Market and Social Justice. *International Journal for Research in Vocational Education and Training*, 5 (3): 178-190.

Baldwin, J., Raven, N. and Webber-Jones, R., 2022. *Managerial cultures in UK further and vocational education: Transforming techno-rationalism into collaboration*. Springer Nature.

Ball, S. J. 2003. “The Teacher’s Soul and the Terrors of Performativity.” *Journal of Education Policy* 18 (2): 215–228.

Beighton, C. 2021. “Biopolitics and lifelong learning: the vitalistic turn in English further education discourse”. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 40 (3): 229–243.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2021.1946863>

City and Guilds. 2014. *Sense and instability: three decades of skills and employment policy*. London: City and Guilds

College Alliance. 2020. *The College of the Future: The UK wide final report from the independent commission on the college of the future*.

<https://d4hfzltwt4wv7.cloudfront.net/uploads/files/The-College-Alliance/TCA-Resources/COF-Report-PDF.pdf>

Dabbous, D., Patel, R., Percy, C. 2020. *Our Plan for Further Education*. Edited by: Newton, O., Laczik, A., and Emms, K. London: The Edge Foundation.

DBIS (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills). 2010. Skills for Sustainable Growth Strategy Document Full Report

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a78f520ed915d07d35b3c0c/10-1274-skills-for-sustainable-growth-strategy.pdf>

DBIS (Department for Business Innovation and Skills). 2015. *Reviewing post-16 Education and Training Organisations: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills* London: HM Government.

DfE Department for Education. 2024. *Skills England: Driving Growth and Widening Opportunities*

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66ffd4fce84ae1fd8592ee37/Skills_England_Report.pdf

Elliott, G. 2015. “Critical practice leadership in post-compulsory education”. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 43 (2): 308-322.

Foster, A. 2005. *Realising the Potential. A review of the future role of further education colleges (The Foster Review)*. Ref 1983-2005DOC-EN, DfES Publications.

Gavin, O. (2005) *Ruth Kelly, Chris Banks & John Cridland comment on the long awaited Foster Review*, available at: <https://www.fenews.co.uk/fe-voices/gruth-kelly-chris-banks-a-john-cridland-comment-on-the-long-awaited-reviewq/> (accessed 14th July 2025)

Hayes, J. 2011. *Oral Statement to Parliament: Vision for Further Education* <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/vision-for-further-education>

HMSO (His Majesty's Stationery Office). 2024. *Provisional T Level Results* <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/provisional-t-level-results>

Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. 2015. *The future for FE colleges in England: The case for a new post-incorporation model*. In: *The Coming of Age for FE, Reflections on the past and Future Role of Further Education Colleges in the UK* edited by Ann Hodgson, 119-219. London: Institute of Education Press

Huddleston, P. and Unwin, L. 2024. *Curriculum in FE Colleges over time: Illustrations of change and continuity*. London: EDGE Foundation

IUSSC (Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee). 2009. *Spend, spend, spend? - the mismanagement of the Learning and Skills Council's capital programme in further education colleges*.

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmdius/530/53002.htm>

Jameson, J. 2013. *Leadership in post-compulsory education: inspiring leaders of the future*. London: David Fulton Publishers.

Jameson, J. and Y. Hillier. 2003. *Researching post-compulsory education*. London: Continuum.

Jephcote, M., Salisbury, J. and Rees, G. 2008. "Being a teacher in further education in changing times". *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 13 (2): 163-172.

Jupp, T. 2014. *Leadership and leaders of colleges*. In: *The Coming of Age for FE, Reflections on the past and Future Role of Further Education Colleges in the UK* edited by Ann Hodgson, 178-198. London: Institute of Education Press

Keep, E. 2006. "State control of the English education and training system—playing with the biggest train set in the world". *Journal of vocational education and training* 58 (1): 47-64.

Kelly, R. 2005. "We are building the colleges of the future." *The Guardian*, November 16, 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2005/nov/16/furthereducation.uk5>

Kennedy, H. 1997. *Learning Works Widening Participation in Further Education*. Coventry: Further Education Funding Council

Kingston, P. 2005a. "New quango to be set up." *The Guardian*, November 16, 2004. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/nov/16/furthereducation.uk1>

Kingston, P. 2005b. "Reformer opts for sparkle, not big bang." *The Guardian*, November 15, 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2005/nov/15/furthereducation.uk1>

Leitch, S. 2006. *Prosperity for all in the global economy - world class skills: final report: The Leitch Report*. London: Crown.

Lingfield, R. 2012. *Professionalism in Further Education Final Report of the Independent Review Panel* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/professionalism-in-further-education-final-report-of-the-independent-review-panel>

Lloyd C, and Wolstencroft P. 2022 "Yes, but what happens next? Succession planning in English further education colleges." *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 27 (3): 391-412. DOI: 10.1080/13596748.2022.2076054

Lucas, N. 2004. *Teaching in Further Education. New Perspectives for a Changing Context*. London: Institute of Education, University of London.

Mason, G., 2020. "Higher education, initial vocational education and training and continuing education and training: where should the balance lie?" *Journal of Education and Work* 33 (7-8): 468-490.

Maylor, H, Smith, V. and Tulley, P. 2004. *Further Education and Skills: Changing systems of change*. London: Education and Training Foundation.

Moura, B. and Tahir, I. 2024. *The State of College Finances in England*. Insitute for Fiscal Studies.

NAO (National Audit Office). 2015. *Overseeing financial sustainability in the further education sector*. Great Britain: National Audit Office.

NAO (National Audit Office). 2020. *Financial sustainability of colleges in England*. Great Britain: National Audit Office.

Norris, E. and Adam, R. 2017. *All Change: Why Britain is so prone to policy reinvention, and what can be done about it*: London: Institute for Government.

Naz, Z. 2023. *Politics of quality improvement in English further education: Policies and practices*. Springer Cham.

Orr, K. 2020. "A future for the further education sector in England." *Journal of Education and Work* 33 (7-8): 507-514.

Page, D. 2011. "I-deals in further education? A new approach to managerial job design." *Management in Education* 25 (4): 182-187.

Parrett, S. 2024 *Jacqui Smith has spelled out a vision for FE we can all get behind*. FE Week
12 November 2024

Playfair, E. 2023. “Reclaiming Professionalism in Further Education”. *FORUM* 65 (2): 83-93).

Simmons, R., 2010. Globalisation, neo-liberalism and vocational learning: the case of English further education colleges. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 15 (4): 363-376.

Sainsbury, D. 2016. *Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education*. Department for Education. HM Government

Sibieta, L. and Tahir, I. 2021. *Further education and sixth form spending in England*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies

Silverwood, J. and Wolstencroft, P. 2023. “The Ruskin Speech and Great Debate in English education, 1976–1979: A study of motivation.” *British Educational Research Journal* 49 (4): 766-781.

Smith, R. and O'Leary, M. 2013. “New Public Management in an age of austerity: knowledge and experience in further education.” *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 45 (3): 244-266.

Spours, K. Hodgson, A. Grainger, P. and Smith, D. 2020. “Area based reviews and their aftermath: moving to a post-incorporation model for further education in England?” *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 72 (3): 350-374.

Wolf, A. 2011. *Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report* Department for Education.

HM Government