



Reimagine lifelong learning

Using our best disruptive thinking to
achieve public policy goals



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A top-down view of a wooden desk. On the left, a tablet with a white screen is partially visible. Below it is a white smartphone, also with a white screen. Further down is a small, round ball made of many colorful rubber bands. In the bottom left corner, a red stapler is partially visible. In the top right corner, some green leaves of a plant are visible. The text 'Reimagine lifelong learning' is written in a large, white, sans-serif font on the right side of the image.

Reimagine lifelong learning

Claire Warnes and Mark Essex

Employers' needs are changing rapidly and our education ecosystem is struggling to keep up. Claire Warnes and Mark Essex argue that our further education sector is well placed to lead the way, building new partnerships with employers, digital learning providers and universities to provide lifelong learning for a 21st century economy.

The world of work is changing fast. Chasing the opportunities created by digital technologies and globalisation, companies are adapting – launching new services, reforming business processes and transforming workforce management. And public policies and services must also reform to meet the needs of citizens in our rapidly evolving economy.

This is particularly true of our education ecosystem, which is charged with preparing and retraining people for the world of work. To thrive over the years to come, people will need to keep up with technological and organisational changes; yet an education ecosystem built around a fast-departing world of lifelong careers, permanent jobs and 20th century technologies is struggling to teach the right mix of skills and capabilities.

With the proportion of contractors and freelancers growing in the workforce, people need the autonomy to work independently and much more flexibly. With digital and data capabilities reshaping every industry, the workforce needs to understand their power and nature. With the pace of workplace change accelerating, people must find more time to learn. And with lifespans and pension ages rising, many more of us will want to retrain and switch careers completely during our working lives.

In his excellent KPMG paper *Rise of the Humans 2*, my colleague Robert Bolton introduces the concept of ‘workforce shaping’. In the digital future he foresees, organisations are not based around specific, full-time jobs, but around capabilities – often provided by skilled ‘gig economy’ workers on short-term engagements¹.

Policy makers are thinking along similar lines: as one recent government publication puts it, “the impact of technological change and dynamic global markets on jobs makes it important for individuals to reskill throughout life to remain competitive in the modern economy²”.

To rebuild our education ecosystem around these emerging realities, we must alter not just the technical skills we teach, but also the ways in which people learn and the capabilities and attributes they develop. And whilst every branch of education – from primary school to university postgraduate courses – will need to adapt, there is one element of our education system that is both well-equipped to move early on this crucial agenda, and well-suited to providing the skills required by tomorrow’s workforce. That element is Further Education.

An evolving role for Further Education

Further Education (FE) providers are experts in designing and delivering lifelong learning and retraining, building on people’s existing capabilities and providing new skills. They have close links to businesses (large and small) and to public sector organisations, many of which provide placements and on-the-job learning through frameworks such as apprenticeships. They’re expert at developing vocational skills, prioritising real-world challenges and directly applicable learning. They’re skilled at building courses and training programmes around people’s working lives, enabling people to keep on earning as they learn. And they’re able to deliver a wide range of qualifications, from degrees and diplomas to apprenticeships and the emerging ‘T-levels’.

So they’re well placed to deliver the ongoing training and development that the UK’s workforce will increasingly need to compete in our fast-evolving, globalised economy.

Many FE providers – which include FE, tertiary and sixth form colleges as well as public and private training providers – also display the entrepreneurialism, resourcefulness and adaptability required to reconfigure education provision for today’s challenges. Their success has always depended on their ability to analyse communities’ training needs, and to find sources of funding – pulling in resources from learners, government and the private sector. And their staff are passionate about what they do: as one recent study found, the FE sector has “a highly-committed workforce that chooses to work in relatively disadvantageous conditions³”.

And government is keen to make more use of this highly capable element of our education system. Theresa May has launched a major review of post-18 education, addressing what she calls the “outdated attitudes” that favour academic over technical qualifications⁴, whilst the sector recently won an additional £500m in annual funding – helping to fund reforms championed by chancellor Philip Hammond as essential to training and “upskilling” young people⁵.

Realising the opportunities

What’s missing is scale and collaboration: our FE sector lacks the buildings, staff or facilities to ramp up training – and to extend it throughout people’s careers – that will be required. But in an education ecosystem in need of transformation, simply providing more of the same will not provide what our economy needs. How could we reimagine further education, finding new ways to generate the capacity that we need?

The solution may lie in building new learning models that connect FE institutions with both digital training systems and local employers, as well as with more collaboration with universities. By putting online learning at the heart of their education offer, FE providers could provide more flexible, accessible training. By channelling learners through partners in industry and public bodies, they could connect learning much more closely to its ultimate purpose: giving people the skills to succeed in their working lives. And by collaborating more with universities, FE providers could enhance progression routes into learning and new career avenues for all citizens. These three elements provide the potential to radically expand capacity, tapping into the learning environments available in both the virtual world and the modern workplace.

Virtual learning environments fit more easily into working people's days. Learners can access elements of their programme at work, whilst travelling and, importantly, when it suits them best. Digital learning can be updated swiftly and packaged in modules and sessions which suit the learner's specific needs. And emerging digital learning technologies present a new swathe of opportunities – virtual reality learning environments, online tutorials and learning sets, and seminars connecting learners globally and to the world's leading specialists.

So digital technologies offer a range of capabilities which complement FE providers' traditional skills in practical, flexible classroom learning. But the virtual world can only go so far in providing the hands-on experience so important to adding value in the workplace. And to provide this, FE could build on its existing links into the real-world economy.

Seeking out synergies

FE providers are expert in assessing learning needs and demand for training; in building partnerships with other providers and employers; in finding sources of funding; in recruiting and managing trainers and lecturers; in fashioning hands-on courses built around demand in the jobs market. Meanwhile, many employers are struggling to find the skilled workers they need – a situation set to grow more acute as Brexit constrains the flow of labour into the UK. And employers are charged with getting a return on their facilities, plant and systems, many of which spend periods idle out of working hours and in less busy times. There is a clear synergy here.

If FE providers became commissioners of training too providers, they could build partnerships with local organisations – from hairdressers and engineering firms to local authorities and NHS trusts – able to provide well-equipped workplaces and experienced, professional staff as trainers.


They could meanwhile commission online learning – tapping into the latest technologies – to supplement and reinforce classroom teaching. Then students would benefit from a mixture of classroom, digital and on-the-job learning, whilst practicing their skills on the kind of modern, advanced equipment only available in the working economy; a far cry from the basic, ageing kit on which many FE providers must rely.

FE providers could build courses that provide experience and training in a wide range of employer bodies, giving students an overview of the various roles and organisations in a sector: perhaps a car manufacturer, along with businesses in its supply chain such as robotics and tools specialists, parts suppliers and automotive design firms. And students would be getting a foothold in the working world, providing them with the contacts and hands-on experience to find jobs at the end of their courses.

Employers, meanwhile, would tap into new revenue streams, strengthen their links into local communities, help address their recruitment problems, and improve their return on investments in facilities and plant. Some of their own staff would benefit from the training required to teach, and the introduction of students into their workforce could help build a future workforce and provide flexible staffing to meet peaks in demand. They would also, of course, win a far stronger role in helping to shape the content and nature of courses – bringing the skills they need into the local workforce. And this too sits neatly with the government's thinking: minister for apprenticeships and skills Anne Milton recently commented that the ongoing FE reforms package is designed to “put control in the hands of employers”.

For FE providers the advantages are obvious. The FE sector is a product of its patchwork history – accumulating roles and providing services that others don't, won't or can't. Yet its proximity to local communities and employers, its agility its vocational focus, and its expertise in identifying funding sources surely leave it well positioned to play a significantly greater role in addressing the economy's changing demands – putting the sector at the heart of Britain's economic and social development.

Ultimately, though, our economy would be the biggest winner from a reformulated education ecosystem – one with an FE sector which is focused on digital tuition, practical vocational training, lifelong learning, and direct connections into the worlds of business and public sector employment. If we are to equip our workforce for the challenges of tomorrow's economies, we'll need to reimagine education; and it seems that we already have all the ingredients in place. All that remains is to bring them together.



“Many FE bodies display the entrepreneurialism, resourcefulness and adaptability required to reconfigure education provision for today’s challenges”

Contacts

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