

# **The Education of Looked After Children: The social implications of further education**

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## **Abstract**

Considerable attention is now paid to the education of looked after children. But the criteria used to judge success tend to focus on GCSE passes and university entry. The further education (FE) sector has been largely overlooked in these discussions even though it provides a wide range of non-school based courses for large number of disadvantaged 16-19 year olds. Evidence from a typical college in England with 6,200 students shows that a third of all older adolescents living in the area, most of them with modest academic achievements, have some connection with the college, and that around 700 of them require special mentoring. In addition, over 50 students, 70% of them female, are looked after - the same number of older teenagers as would be in the care of a medium sized local authority. The article seeks to alert practitioners and carers to the contribution that FE can make to the welfare of older looked after children as participation in college life and the specialist help received can help mitigate some of the widely reported problems facing care leavers.

## **Introduction**

In discussions about the education of children in care, most of the focus has been on the numbers gaining GCSEs or attending universities whereas another important tranche of the system, and one that is especially relevant to disadvantaged and less able children, further education, has been somewhat overlooked.

For example, in the Department for Education's 2014 Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities : *Promoting the Education of Looked After Children*, the term further education appears only once at the end of the document (para 46, page 17) and then as part of a general exhortation for local authorities to do a good job. They should:

ensure that links are made to further education colleges and higher education institutions and that care leavers are supported to find establishments that understand and work to meet the needs of looked after children and care leavers

## **Defining further education**

The term further education refers to non-school based, post sixteen education up to Higher Education level. It is mainly vocational, concentrating on subjects such as engineering, IT, business studies, hair and beauty, art and design, technology, building and health and social care. In the UK, FE colleges are the largest provider of education for 16-19 year olds. For 17 year olds still in the education system in England in 2010, colleges accounted for 31% of full time and 4% of part time students, proportions higher than for state schools (27%), independent schools (6%) and sixth form colleges (9%). They tend to be 'local' – often referred to as the local tech - and non-specialist, with some exceptions, such those offering courses in agriculture. It has also been significant in training a high percentage of part-time day release students pursuing apprenticeships and providing courses for adolescents and adults with special needs. In addition, they offer opportunities for older people to undertake vocational courses and acquire a basic education, access to higher education and other second chance openings.

The size of the sector is also often unappreciated. In addition to those highlighted above, there are 297,000 young people attending college on apprenticeships. Overall, in the UK there are 2.9 million people who have been educated or trained via FE. The national budget for this was £7.5 billion in 2013/4 with colleges' income coming from a variety sources: 48% from the government (via the Department for Education), 29% from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) via the skills and funding agency, 11% from tuition fees, 2% from Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), 2% from local authorities, 1% from research grants and 7% from other sources. Like every public service, FE has faced substantial cuts in recent years, but especially relevant to disadvantaged young people has been the removal of the Education Maintenance Allowance and threats to policies of widening access and raising aspirations.

## **The history context**

FE colleges have their origins in mechanics institutes, mining schools and secretarial colleges, all of which were closely related to the main industries of a particular locality. The period from the 1930s to 1956 saw a 'make-do and mend' approach with little investment, a lack of central government

support and very variable local provision from the education authorities (LEAs). However, a 1956 White Paper on technical education streamlined the system, gave greater structure to technical and vocational education and led to a considerable growth of day release courses against a background of a growing national economy and high levels of employment. The students were almost entirely part-time, released to college one day a week and able, in theory, to progress from craft to technician to advanced Higher National certificate (HNC) qualifications – although few achieved this because of the long hours involved, the demands of attending evening classes and a lack of student support services. Industrial Training Boards were established and the training was funded through a training levy paid by employers.

This situation endured until around 1972, the beginning of a decade that saw a rapid decline of traditional manufacturing industries in the UK. This was marked in FE by a shift from part-time craft based courses to more general education, such as GCSEs, liberal studies, development of full-time vocational courses and the introduction of new qualifications, such as national vocational qualifications (NVQs) and business and technician education council qualifications (BTEC). Growing youth unemployment and associated social tensions led the central government to respond with schemes such as the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOPS) and the Youth Training Scheme (YTS), which were partly about social containment as well as ‘training for stock’. It was a period characterised by a growing central government control mainly through the Department of Education and Science, but also the Department of Employment

After 1983, colleges became increasingly autonomous and this process culminated in incorporation in 1993. This formally severed the funding and governance link with LEAs and set up a national funding body, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). Colleges were able to plan their own curricula, set their own fees and salaries and borrow to fund expansion. An early review by this new organisation revealed that LEA rates of funding for FE varied on a ratio of 3 to 1 (£4,500 to £1,500 per full time equivalent student), so its first task was to establish a national tariff for funding, create quality control by instituting an inspectorate which in due course became part of the national system for education inspections (Ofsted) and to support government social and economic policies. It thus encouraged a major programme of expansion. Private providers of training proliferated and the sector became more market driven and competitive. A very broad range of courses developed and the recommendations in the Kennedy Report of 1997, entitled *Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education*, to develop the concept of lifelong learning were adopted by the

FEFC. A number of college mergers took place and a major building programme was launched.

This approach prevailed until around 2005 when fundamental questions began to be raised about the purpose of FE with the notion of a 'return to basics' gaining credence. The FEFC had merged with the Training and Enterprise Councils to form the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), shifting the agenda back towards skills for employment and stronger links with employers, the reintroduction of traditional apprenticeships and a perspective of FE linked into a national strategy to raise levels of productivity. This change, combined with substantial cuts in funding, has led to lifelong learning taking something of a back seat. The government has recently initiated a major *Review of post-16 Education and Training Institutions* which will undoubtedly lead to further mergers to create more efficient providers working closely with employers to meet the needs of local economies. It will also create 'a new network of prestigious Institutes of Technology and National Colleges to deliver high standard provision to levels 3, 4 and 5'.

The range of courses provided outside the realm of orthodox academic teaching and vocational training is illustrated in the following two examples. As explained earlier, one major role of FE is the provision of Access and Foundation Degree Courses. These offer the first rung on the ladder into HE through non-traditional courses. They serve predominantly women students in their late 20s onwards, looking for ways back into education to develop their careers. Courses are part-time (typically around 12 hours per week) tailored to meet students' child care needs. There are strong links with higher education institutions which validate and moderate courses, and attention is paid to ensure good tutoring and counselling support.

An example of more specialist work concerns prison education. Until 1993, LEA provision for this was delegated to individual colleges but after incorporation was transferred formally, thereby opening the door to competitive tendering every few years. It is now concentrated in the hands of a small number of providers. The colleges offer a robust core of basic skills plus vocational courses although, obviously, possibilities are constrained by the movement of prisoners, security considerations and economic and social factors that complicate the rehabilitation process.

### **Policy Issues**

Because of its role in serving young people who are not academic highfliers gliding unscathed along the GCSE-A level-university avenue and its close association with major social and economic problems, the role and function

of FE has been subject to continual scrutiny. What is interesting, however, is how many of the issues being debated are highly relevant to discussions about the role of children's services and to fundamental questions such as the criteria that should be used to evaluate the looked after system. For example, at a recent seminar, the following questions were listed as currently occupying the minds of those responsible for running FE<sup>1</sup>: what should be its focus - a narrow concentration on learning for skills, particularly for 16-19 year olds, or lifelong learning and second chance opportunities? Does it have a role in addressing the widening equal opportunities gap in British society? Should the state play any part in promoting non-vocational adult education or is this concept, manifest in earlier initiatives like Cambridge village colleges or Leicestershire community colleges, a thing of the past? To what extent are fees a deterrent to participation? How far is FE about social control and keeping young people off the streets in a structured environment at a critical stage in their lives? How does the UK compare internationally in terms of vocational education? Has FE been neglected by an elitist attitude amongst an educational establishment that is anti-industry? Is German industrial success, in part, a result of the much higher status awarded to craft and technician skills? Should employers take greater responsibility for strengthening the skills base of the country, and so on?

In addition, there was one particularly worrying parallel with social services when Vince Cable, until recently the responsible Government minister, was advised when his department was discussing budget cuts that FE could be closed down 'because nobody would notice'.

These general issues can be better explored by looking at the situation in a typical UK FE college.

### **A College Example**

South Staffordshire College is spread over six sites and serves an area of 327 square miles with a population of about 18,300 16-19 year olds (it has some additional students from contracts involving work in other parts of the country). It has 6,278 students, 16% of them on apprenticeships and 10% continuing adult education. This means that nearly one third (30%) of young people aged 16-19 living in the catchment area have some involvement with the college and most of these will have acquired modest academic qualifications while at school.

A recent student survey revealed high levels of satisfaction with the vast majority of respondents saying that enrolment was easy, they were on the

right course, felt safe at the college, felt welcome on their first day and received good advice. While these results may appear unduly rosy, the important point is that the college appears to succeed with many young people who have had miserable experiences elsewhere in the education system.

Studies of older looked after adolescents and of care leavers all emphasise the social isolation and loneliness, the poor self-esteem, lack of money, feeling different from others and the poor prospects in job and housing markets that can confound their transition to adulthood. Moreover, it is well established that solutions to these difficulties, such as hasty cohabitation, poor financial management or falling pregnant, can exacerbate their situation. Although in the UK legislation has strengthened the requirement for children's departments to offer services well into adulthood, this support tends to be at a general rather than a day-to-day level.

Given what has been said, it can be seen that enrolment in a FE college is one way of helping ease an adolescent's move to adulthood. It structures the young person's day, enables him or her to be part of a broader peer group, gives provides a social life and, hopefully, creates a sense of achievement and progress leading to a useful qualification. In short, it can help provide a stable, safe and nurturing environment that eases a difficult life transition.

A good example of these benefits is provided by care leaver Hayley, a 16 year old special needs student who left school with two U GCSE grades in Maths and English. She enrolled for Entry Level to study Routes to Animal Care. She spent ten years in foster care but now lives at home with support from children's services because of her mother's special needs. A college course was seen as an important part of the plan to ease her return to her family but this was only made possible because her current mentor visited her school to meet her and manage the admission which involved several meetings with Hayley's mother and social worker, the completion of the necessary forms and the arrangement of transport. Naturally, the number of transitions involving leaving school and returning home had made her very anxious and she was additionally nervous about starting college. So, she was paired with a fellow student on day one and there is continuous liaison with her social worker and support worker to keep her on track. She is now settled and keen to go onto Level 1 Equine next year towards her chosen Career

A different experience is provided by Jacob, a long-term 'child in need' and now a 19yr old ICT Level 3 student. He left school with a D grade in GCSE

Maths. While there, he was referred to a mentor for poor attendance who discovered that although his teachers were aware of his troubled background, they did not know the extent to which family had been receiving social work help, including some respite care, due to his mother's depression and the learning needs of his two younger siblings. His poor school attendance was mostly due to his caring for the rest of his family. Since enrolling at college, he has received further mentor support resulting in improved attendance and recommendation for a HND course. He is now seeking part time work to save up for university – something he never dreamed possible two years ago.

Sometimes an individual's disability combines with structural deprivation to suggest an inauspicious outcome, as in the case of Sean. He is an 18 year old doing a Level 2 Animal Care course. He has seven good GCSE's but due to dyspraxia, struggled with organising himself and his school work. He was allocated a support assistant but his academic progress was hindered by an unexpected family financial crisis that badly affected his mother. He had to get a job to support his family. Since enrolling at college, he has received help to developed coping strategies to help balance college work and part-time employment and his ambition now is either to work in an animal sanctuary or to train as a learning support assistant.

These social implications of further education are illustrated in the following table which shows the numbers out of the 6,000+ students at the college receiving special mentoring and the reasons for this.

Table 1 Number of students receiving special mentoring and the main reasons for this

Year	Referrals	Main Reasons
2013/14	643	Course Issues
		Relationships
		Anxiety
2014/15	730	Pregnancy
		Domestic Violence
		Mental Health

		Inappropriate Behaviour
		Attempted Suicide
2015/16	Term one only - 430	Anxiety
		Mental Health
		Attendance
		Relationships
		Finance
		Self Harm

It can be seen that not only are the numbers large, a case load of over 600, but the reasons are varied and echo the range of difficulties encountered by many care leavers.

Even more significant is the fact that 55 of the college's 2015-6 students were looked after and that 39 of these were female. This is no small responsibility. It is the same number of 16-19 year olds as would be found in a local authority with a total looked after population of 250; and on March 31st 2016, 41 (27%) of the 152 in English authorities had an in-care number lower than this. Even more striking is the fact that only just over half of them (82 or 54%) had more than 39 16-19 year old girls. So if the guidance on care planning, reviews and support services is properly followed, it involves a considerable amount of work for staff in addition to their teaching duties.

Table 2 Number of looked after children attending the college

Year	LAC Numbers
2013-14	44
2014-15	60



To ensure that this looked after group receive oversight and help, every effort is made to identify them all prior to enrolment and entry. Schools will have identified most of these young people and liaised with the College's Learner Support service. Failing that, there is an area on the application form requesting relevant information in a manner that indicates offers of support rather than asking respondents to label themselves. Occasionally, some young people may also reveal or discuss their care situation during the application interview.

Each of these young people is offered a mentor to support them on entry although it has to be said that not everyone wants this, it is up to each individual to decide. If the answer is 'yes', the college facilitates a meeting between the young person, his or her mentor, tutor and social worker as a part of the induction process so that individually tailored support can be structured and a long-term plan put in place. This ensures that each young person has the legally required Personal Education Plan based on the framework suggested in official guidance and that the detail appropriate to each individual is negotiated and agreed with all parties.

The involvement of the in-college mentor is at the level requested by the young person but at a minimum it will involve a termly review at which the Personal Education Plan is reviewed and a check made that he or she is getting the full entitlement to financial support.

On completing their course, the young people will be given an exit interview which will offer advice and guidance on further training and/or employment, preparing a CV and possible careers. Those wishing to go on to higher education will visit universities and will, if requested, be accompanied by their mentor to open days and interviews. All future educational involvements are monitored via the College's student progress tracking ICT system so that the effectiveness of the support provided can be assessed.

It is important to note that all these activities are supported by the Staffordshire Virtual Headteacher and her team who, since their appointment, have greatly enhanced the amount and nature of support available to older looked after children.

The three case studies and two sets of statistics all serve to emphasise the considerable social implications of the further education sector for

disadvantaged young people and, by association, older looked after children

Finally, it is noticeable that the staff employed in FE colleges come from more diverse backgrounds than those working in schools or children's services. As in all social care, there is a continuous debate about the relationship between fully qualified professionals, less qualified assistants and volunteers. Mel is one of the most successful teachers in the college and works with students with severe special needs, especially those on the autistic spectrum. Her CV makes interesting reading in the light of the qualification debate.

She left School at 15 with no qualifications and went to a FE College for two years to acquire a NNEB Nursery qualification. She then undertook community work with women with learning difficulties before having the first of her three children at the age of 22. She then did part time work at a supermarket to complement her husband's low pay. He eventually enrolled in FE to study plumbing in order to improve his pay and prospects. This sparked an interest in Mel and via FE she became a learning support assistant before moving on to gain a teaching qualification. She is now employed at college as A grade 1 Teacher of horticulture and animal care plus the development of independent skills. All her lesson observations have been judged outstanding against Ofsted.

## **Conclusion**

The case studies in this article may be perceived as somewhat idealistic by those working with looked after children. But their purpose is not to act as a puff for FE but to alert practitioners and carers to the possible contribution it can make to the welfare of older adolescents in care, something that tends to be overlooked in discussions about their education. Participation in college life and the specialist help received can help mitigate some of the problems affecting care leavers highlighted in research studies.

Moreover, FE is continuously grappling with difficult policy and practice issues but what is interesting is their similarity to those facing all welfare services. Thus, beleaguered social workers, residential staff and foster carers might gain some comfort from the fact they are not alone in their anxiety and, on a more positive note, that carefully managed use of FE might help promote the well-being of young people who up 'til now have had a rough deal in their lives.

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