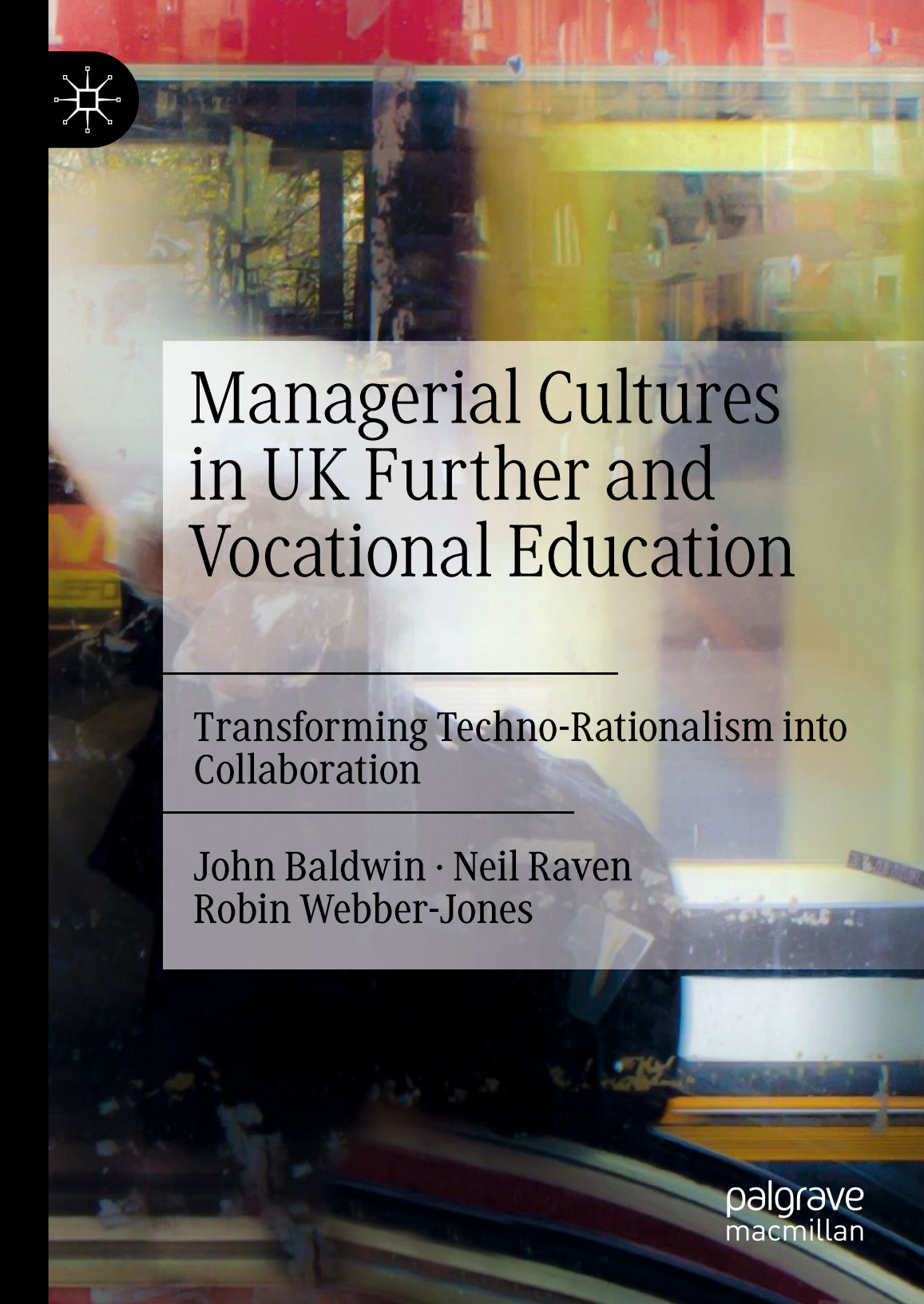

Managerial Cultures in UK Further and Vocational Education

Transforming Techno-Rationalism into Collaboration

John Baldwin · Neil Raven
Robin Webber-Jones

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ISBN 978-3-031-04442-7 ISBN 978-3-031-04443-4 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04443-4

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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Introduction

This book has been many years in the making. Collectively, the authors have worked in further education (FE) and skills for over 65 years. These experiences have been mainly in management and leadership roles. We have had countless conversations about the impact that the policies of various governments have had on the sector and what, in turn, this has meant for managers. This book is unique as it is an attempt to crystallise those discussions, to reflect on those conversations, and to explore where further education emerged from and consider where it may be going. The book explores, perhaps for the first time, how policy has led to structures which are built on a managerial and market-led approach and celebrates where collaboration has worked. It attempts to authentically capture the impact of encounters with policy that FE managers have had, through their stories, reflections, and experiences.

While there is an emerging body of literature (see Orr 2020; Coffield 2011; Hodson et al. 2014) on senior leadership in further education, or on further education finding its place in the world, little has been written on the day-to-day impact that policy has had and the managerial responses to it. This is where this book seeks to place itself. The aim is for the research contained herein to shine a light on the trials and human costs that have been, and are being, experienced by the sector, as well as the opportunities it has to triumph. We believe that FE has the potential to

J. Baldwin et al., *Managerial Cultures in UK Further and Vocational Education*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04443-4_1

make a much greater contribution to education and training as a central player rather than the current peripheral role, particularly in relation to higher education (HE). The book builds on the research-informed practice approaches that were developed by Gregson et al. (2015), and which are increasingly being adopted in further education, but considers this from the perspective of leaders and managers. Whilst it is aimed at a wide readership, some terms and concepts may not be familiar to all. The glossary is a good reference point to remind the reader of key definitions and how they are being used here.

The Chapters

The book has the following structure, to guide the reader through our approach.

Chapter 2 seeks to define what further education is, and how legislation and government perspectives have shaped it. It puts further education in context and provides a history of how the FE sector has evolved from the nineteenth-century mechanics' institutes. In describing that history, we start to see how the distinct role of colleges has emerged and how this has constantly changed with government whim, and that the route that the sector has taken has often been driven by funding, or the lack of it. In affording a wider context, a comparison is made between the FE sector in the UK and in other countries. This book focuses almost exclusively on the English further education sector.

Chapter 3 explores the impact of policy in greater depth, looking at the perception the current government has about the role of FE and the type of curriculum that should be offered. We suggest that, philosophically, FE is not providing the best form of knowledge and skills that it could, as it is driven by economic pressures. We start to discuss the impact this has on FE managers and the styles of management they are forced to adopt. We also discuss how this impacts on social mobility and how colleges could play a much greater role in enhancing outcomes and prospects for students, particularly in its potential to facilitate progression to higher education.

Chapter 4 discusses how successive English governments since the 1970s have imposed a managerial and neoliberal philosophy of operation on FE colleges. It looks at how this affects the way that colleges are structured, how managers are forced to behave, and the power that is given to different departments in colleges. We demonstrate that although colleges are technically independent organisations, they are hidebound by legislation and government diktat. As a result, colleges are not able to offer the education and training their managers and tutors would like to provide.

Chapter 5 begins to explore the remedies for the situations that colleges find themselves in and considers alternative approaches to managing colleges that have the potential to provide better outcomes for students. It describes research that we have undertaken in how FE managers could better manage. It looks at how students and other stakeholders can be more involved in the design of the curriculum and in the running of colleges. The chapter also describes how the culture of colleges can be changed to provide a better experience for all.

Chapter 6 examines in more detail the role that FE colleges can play in improving social mobility and fair access to higher education. It opens by recognising that FE colleges are significant recruiters of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those pursuing qualifications required for university entry. Yet, HE progression rates remain comparatively low. It then describes research undertaken by us on things could change, and how the life chances of these young people, as well as older learners, could be improved if some of the shackles imposed on colleges were to be removed.

Chapter 7 focuses entirely on the role that FE colleges could play in improving social mobility by expanding their ability to offer appropriate higher education courses and training. It examines the difficulties and constraints imposed on college when trying to provide higher education and training programmes and the expectation in the UK that higher education is mainly about three-year bachelor's degrees. Building on the research described in Chap. 6, it suggests ways that FE colleges could help those from more deprived backgrounds to flourish.

Chapter 8 starts to offer some democratic and pragmatic responses to the challenges of the time, while the future of FE continues to be debated. It examines in more detail the research described in Chap. 5, which is key

to understanding the problems that colleges face and how lessons learned could enable colleges to provide much better education and training.

Chapter 9 opens by summarising the challenges that FE colleges face before offering a prescription for the changes that need to take place to ensure that the sector is able to provide the best service for its students, industry, the economy, and the communities it serves.

The book does not offer a single remedy to the phenomenon discussed. As practitioners and researchers, the authors recognise that the issues being grappled with are complex and have emerged over many decades, through many political struggles, and through national and international structures. Most critically, the book attempts to understand that education, and therefore, by its very nature, educational leadership, is a complex and multi-disciplinary process. Consequently, to suggest a universal solution to complex problems would be to diminish the professionalism and freedom that educators need in order to shape the lives of millions of people every year. As this book also explores, further education engages in a range of different activities and for a wide range of different groups, so one solution cannot suit all situations. This book sets the scene on how educational improvement and its evaluation could be considered, and how managerial and neoliberal approaches shape current practices and could influence future ones.

Research

Throughout this book we will make reference to research that we have carried out and research by others. In addition to considering the challenges of these approaches, the book uses the authors' 'insider insights' to consider how things could change. In further education contexts, it is hard to see how research (which has generally been conducted by individuals external to the sector) can or should be the main vehicle for informing policy governing the sector. Wider groups, including Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), and others, have influenced policy. However, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that the actual impact of such policies (however

well-intentioned) upon those who have to instigate these policies is positive. Furthermore, in other contexts the use of research evidence seems scant. As Raven (2017) cites, in 2002 Landry worked with policy makers to establish how research influenced some of their practices. However, only 8 per cent said that research fully influenced their work, and a further 38 per cent said that it might occasionally impact upon their work. Of course, not all policy decisions will necessarily be 'researched', nor do the findings of all research studies agree or correlate. If they did then governments who are responsible for the implementation of policies would face a much simpler job. In addition, problems of policy implementation are further compounded when policy is born out of ideology. For example, in legislation passed by consecutive Labour and Conservative Governments from 1997 onwards, which has contributed to the rise of neoliberal education policy and structures.

Bearing in mind the managerial and neoliberal climate in which colleges are forced to operate, each of the chapters will consider the impact this is having on how they are led and managed, and what this means for their students and those who work in them, and how this impinges on competitors, the UK economy, and society in general.

While Ofsted, the Teaching Excellence and Outcomes Framework (TEF), and other inspection and audit regimes do not always create the necessary space, this book starts with the approach of the impact that managerialism and neoliberalism are having on colleges to present ideas. Gray (2017, 41) when conducting research into exam boards said that 'we decided that expert insiders would be the best source of knowledge' as opposed to looking at raw data and outcomes to start with. She goes on to argue that such an approach allows 'participants' reports to be scrutinized'. Zembylas (2003, 220) states that 'insider research cannot involve objective observation and analysis; it is instead an encounter between individual choices and cultural tools employed in a particular institutional context'. While this can be argued in all social science research, insider research 'cannot but be situated in the researcher's own organisational, political experience and context'. Far from being a problem, the position of objectivity means the insider-researcher gives authenticity to the research by being reflective and reflexive:

> Reflexivity suggests that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their own selves in the research, seeking to understand their part in, or influence on, the research. Rather than trying to eliminate researcher effects (which is impossible as researchers are part of the world they are investigating) researchers should hold themselves up to the light. (Cohen 2017, 303)

We are not alone in taking such an approach to researching and considering the wider education sector. When undertaking the 'Examination Standards Project' researchers from the Institute of Education (IOE) decided that the case study methodology was the most relevant for exploring the system of educational standards in many different countries as this 'allowed each case to show in its own contextual conditions, and allowed multiple units of analysis for each one' (Yin 2014, 50). Further, case study research would be the preferred method, compared to others in situations where (1) the main research questions are 'how' or 'why' questions, (2) the researcher has no control over behavioural events, and (3) the focus of the study is a contemporary (as opposed to an entirely historical) phenomenon (Yin 2014, 2).

As Sikes and Potts (2008) note, insider-researchers are 'proper' members of the community they are researching. Gray (2017) argues that this allows insider-researchers to consider their work as that of the reflective practitioner (Dewey 1933; Stenhouse 1975; Schön 1983). In Dewey's 1933 book *How We Think*, he articulated how this thought process has educational value, characterising this as conscious reasoned, sceptical, and logical:

> Active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusion to which it tends, constitutes reflective thought. (Dewey 1933, 6)

One of the central reasons for adopting a 'narrative inquiry' approach is its flexibility. McDonald (1996, 72) recalls how randomised controlled trials were the 'gold standard' of social science research but acknowledges that this is increasingly diminishing as other approaches allow greater flexibility to researchers. He argues that they came with a very determined fixed design, with a 'hallmark of pre-specification' (McDonald

1996, 73). However, he points out that, carried out in a real-world setting, they require researchers to know in advance what to look for, in order to prove or disprove a point or a particular theoretical framework. The same approach also demands extensive pilot work to explore what is feasible. Hammersley (2000) puts together a defence of 'qualitative design'. Such designs come from a range of theoretical positions which as Anastas (2004 and Anastas and MacDonald 1994) suggests requires some flexibility.

Leadership, Management, and Administration

Throughout this book frequent reference will be made to the terms, 'leadership, 'management', and 'administration' concerning the roles that some people play in organisations. Unfortunately, in the literature these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, and there are no agreed definitions. Connolly et al. (2019) suggest that the expression management is often used in relationship to hierarchical power and derives from the Weberian concept of bureaucracy. In an educational context, they suggest that a manager is responsible for some part of an education system. They argue that the distinction between management and administration is one of level. A person higher in the organisation is likely to be a manager and one lower is more likely to be an administrator. However, Bush (2019) points out that in Australia and the USA the expression administrator is used instead of manager. Connolly et al. (2019) indicate that the term 'educational leadership' is used in two ways. First, by usage in England what was previously a head teacher has now become the school leader. Second, it is used as a reference to somebody who leads and thus someone who influences and motivates others—often because they are charismatic.

Bennis (1989) produced the following table to illustrate the distinction between managers and leaders. It is now a little dated but illustrates the essence of the differences (Table 1.1). However, much of this is just semantics because most people in middle or senior roles in schools and colleges will undertake leading, managing, and administrative tasks as part of their role. In fact, the concept of distributed leadership means that

Table 1.1 The differences between managers and leaders

The manager	The leader
Administers	Innovates
Is a copy	Is an original
Maintains	Develops
Focuses on systems	Focuses on people
Relies on control	Inspires trust
Short-range view	Long-range view
Asks how and when	Asks what and why
Eye on the bottom line	Eye on horizon
Imitates	Originates
Accepts the status quo	Challenges the status quo
Obeys orders without question	Obeys when appropriate but thinks
Does things right	Does the right thing
Is trained	Learns
Managers operate within the culture	*Leaders create the culture*

Source: Bennis (1989)

anybody who works in a school or college can take on a leadership role when required (Lumby 2017).

Technical Rational Environment

The book's main theme is the impact of top-down strategies to imposing policy and practices on the FE sector, and it suggests some more pragmatic and democratic approaches which should benefit the sector in the longer term. Indeed, it is argued that technical-rational approaches to the development, implementation, and evaluation of education policy—from the top-down and through the measurement of outcomes—have put education leaders into positions where they have to make decisions and exercise judgement in complex and unfolding situations. Moreover, this is often in contexts where financial pressures and imperatives to meet targets and demonstrate outcomes often take precedence over the protection and maintenance of desirable educational values. Specifically, values based on enabling students to have a fulfilled life rather than merely learning how to acquire employment-based skills or knowledge. These are the kind of values that Dewey (1916), Dunne (2015), Carr (1995),

and Sarason (1996), amongst others referenced in this study, argue could be implemented to ensure more sustained, pragmatic, and democratic ways of working. It is this technical-rational approach that has resulted in programmes of training and development for leaders being mainly focused on operational activities, financial management, and the manipulation of data. A consequence of this is that many enduring issues facing education leaders and their teams remain unresolved with considerable cost to individuals, institutions, and the sector at large. Their work indicates that these approaches have existed for some time as FE and the skills sector have become increasingly preoccupied with marketing at the expense of students' learning.

It appears that a key challenge in accepting top-down, technical-rational approaches to educational management is an assumption that the impact of policy can, is, or should be clearly and immediately evident, and that it manifests itself as a clearly observable event and a measurable outcome. This assumption fails to recognise that impact is often part of a process of change and that there can be outcomes of educational policy which are not intended. Furthermore, practices are complex processes, and the context that they operate in can also be difficult to observe. Indeed, some aspects of education such as enthusiastic, empathetic, and charismatic teaching are almost impossible to quantify.

Identity and Funding

Indeed, further education and skills sector remains, at the time of writing, chronically underfunded (Orr 2020). Over half of the further education colleges (FECs) have had to receive additional government support or risk becoming insolvent. As a consequence, there are an increased number of inspection and regulatory bodies which 'measure' the activity and impact of the sector. These include – but are not limited to – the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the Office of FE Commissioner, the Office for Students (OfS), the Education Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IFATE), The Office for Qualifications (Ofqual), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), as well as support agencies such as the

Education Training Foundation (ETF), and the further education Trust for Leadership (FETL). All of these, along with ensuring the requirements of awarding organisations are met, are proving costly – both financially and for the humans involved. Indeed, Baroness Wolf, who led a significant reform of the structure of education for 16- to 18-year-olds in 2011, has commented that too much public money is being spent on ensuring that the demands of these inspections and audit regimes are being met, rather than having funding meet from line teaching and learning activity. This is while reforms in higher education from 2012 have resulted in an average £5000 funding gap per student between further and higher education.

Exley (2020, 124) asks if 'there has ever been a golden age for FE'. He then explores how a range of policy drivers ('from Leitch to Lingfield') have attempted to map one out but all have failed. While Boris Johnson, as Prime Minister, increased the base rate of funding for 16- to 18-year-olds with a £400 million cash injection in 2021, it did not cover the 12 per cent real-terms cut for 16- to 18-year-old funding in FE (which already has less public funding than sixth-form colleges) between 2010/2011 and 2018/2019. Indeed, it made up less than 7 per cent of that cut. Moreover, adult learning suffered bigger cuts. Removing apprenticeship income, student numbers dropped from 4.4 million to 1.5 million between 2009/2010 and 2018/2019. All of this resulted in a 9 percentage point reduction in roles in the sector (or 12,000 FTEs). The Principal of East Coast College in 2019 said:

> There are too many old thinking college principals who refer to the glory days of freedom from LEA control, higher pay and promises of autonomy that have never truly materialised. Incorporation has failed to protect the security of colleges, of staff and students. It has failed to protect continued investment, it has failed to protect high standards, it has failed to protect support from those in high government since 1992.

As Exley (2020) says 'colleges many have won their freedom – but the cost has been profound'. Yet, as we will argue, the challenges FE colleges face are far from insurmountable, but it will need a significant change of attitude, outlook, and philosophy.

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2

The Trouble with Further Education

This chapter sets the scene by describing what further education is and its history. It places English FE into an international perspective, provides an introduction to the problems that colleges currently face and offers some of the background to our research.

What Is the Further Education Sector?

Further education colleges are represented by the Association of Colleges (AoC), and each year the AoC produces an overview of the main facts and figures relating to the colleges in England. Most of the following is taken from the most recent of these reports (AoC 2021).

Everybody knows about schools because they attended at least one, and most people in England know about universities because they have a high profile and feature regularly in the news. However, fewer people know about further education colleges. At the time of writing, there were 234 colleges in England, which vary enormously in size and focus, as summarised in Table 2.1.

In 2019/2020, 1.7 million people were educated or trained in FE colleges. Of these, some one million were adults over the age of 18, about 652,000 were 16- to 18-year-old students, and 10,500 were aged 14 or

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https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04443-4_2

Table 2.1 Types of further education college

Type	Number
General further education colleges	163
Sixth-form colleges	47
Art and design and performing arts colleges	2
Land-based colleges	12
Institutions of adult learning	10

Source: AOC (2021, 2)

Table 2.2 Percentage of 16- to 18-year-old students by institution

Type	Percentage
FE and sixth-form colleges	34
All state-funded schools	25
Higher education institutions	12
Not in education or employment	7
Employment	7
Independent schools	5
Apprenticeships	5
Other education or training	5
Special schools	1

Source: AOC (2021, 14)

15, with the average age of an FE student being 28. Moreover, FE colleges, along with sixth-form colleges, are responsible for the education of more than one in three 16- to 18-year-olds, as illustrated in Table 2.2.

Colleges deliver a very large and diverse range of qualifications, and they include:

- 150,000 students of age 16–18 taking A levels.
- 198,000 students retaking GCSE Maths and/or English.
- 579,000 students taking STEM subjects.
- 55,000 students of age 16–18 undertook an apprenticeship based at a college.
- 118,000 people are undertaking higher education courses at English FE colleges (AOC 2021, 9).

Whilst these qualifications run from entry level to master's degrees, most are vocational, job related (including Business and Technical Education Councils [BTECs] and the new T [technical] levels), rather than academic (such as A levels).

Most 16- to 18-old students studying with colleges are full time, whilst most older students attend colleges on a part-time basis. Adults (defined as those aged 19 and above) may be studying for a qualification or can be taking part in adult and community learning courses. Adult and community learning courses do not necessarily lead to a qualification, are usually delivered on a part-time basis, and cover such subjects as yoga, healthy cooking, and introductory computer courses (Education and Training Foundation, 2020). Moreover, colleges are also large employers (employ some 105,000 full-time equivalent staff of whom 50,000 are teachers), and spenders, with the total college income in 2019/2020 exceeding £6 billion (AOC 2021, 27).

A History of Further Education

Trying to define further education is no easy task. Even the authors of this book, who have accumulated more than six decades of experience working in and with the sector between them, have had several debates about what further education colleges do, how they interact with other 'types' of provider (such as universities or independent training providers), and what their relationship to the state is. This has also been a problem for researchers and legislators. The history of education in England, certainly since the Academies Act of 2010, has been one of all-pervading competition, which has, in turn, led to managerial approaches (such as those used in manufacturing, where there are things like 'line management') being deployed across the sector. Yet, a study of the history of further education reveals that neoliberal (market-orientated) approaches were in place before the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. This will be discussed in much more detail in Chap. 3. Each of the four nations of the UK have their own funding and systems for further education. For instance, Scottish FE colleges work much closer with their local authorities, and both Scottish and Welsh colleges have higher percentages of HE