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## Looking forward to the long ago

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Dennis, Carol Azumah (2020). Looking forward to the long ago. Management in Education (Early Access).

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/0892020620965571>

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# Looking forward to the long ago

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Management in Education  
1–2  
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Management & Administration Society  
(BELMAS)



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DOI: 10.1177/0892020620965571

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A few weeks ago, while reminiscing about the early days of *Management in Education*, I came across an article written about Further and Higher Education in one of the journal's first editions. Not precisely *Volume 1, Issue 1* but close (Locke, 1988). Close enough for me to feel that at least the management and leadership challenges that matter most to those of us working in post-16 education were firmly placed on an early agenda for the journal and have remained there ever since alongside the concerns of our colleagues working in schools and other settings. In this article, I reread Locke's 1988 paper in which he ponders the significance of a recently written National Audit Board report on Good Management Practice and the immanent separation of polytechnics and larger colleges from local authorities. While Locke is most interested in Higher Education, my rereading considers the implications of what he says for Further Education (FE) sector. FE, like its international counterparts, Community Colleges in the United States and Technical and Further Education in Australia, is a large amorphous sector which caters for everything between school and Higher Education. FE, premised on vocational learning, offers second-chance educational progression for students who might otherwise be relegated to the margins. There seems to be an unstated view that prior to 1992 was a golden age for FE with well-managed colleges, within which everyone enjoyed working and studying. Locke's paper makes it clear this wistfulness is misplaced. Through the haze of my nostalgia, I consider the significance attached to a pivotal moment for the sector from two different perspectives: the moment prior to its inception and now.

FE Colleges although formally instituted as part of The Education Act in 1944 have been part of the UK's post-16 educational landscape since the 19th century. When attempting to identify the history of an institution, there are several possible starting points. The earliest and most direct precursor to the FE college as it is currently understood is probably the Mechanics Institutes of the early 19th century, the first of which was founded in Glasgow by Dr George Birkbeck. The policy thrust behind these early developments will be quite familiar to those of us who research, write about or are otherwise interested in post-16 education. Politicians and public shared anxieties about Britain's place in a capitalist world. In an increasingly competitive international arena, the United Kingdom lagged behind France and Germany in the global skills race; young people who left school and were not in employment or education

needed to be industriously occupied. From its inception, the FE college was a solution to several social, economic and moral preoccupations.

Yet somehow in reading the first focused mention of Further and Higher Education in *Management in Education*, published in 1988, I was nonetheless surprised. Surprised because for most contemporary scholars, certainly as reflected in the doctoral thesis I have been able to examine over the past decade, 1992 is our ground zero, the moment when what had existed was destroyed and everything started again. It has an almost mythical status as a point of origin. Everything changed in 1992. So much so that some few years later, post-incorporation, we were a sector in crisis (Robson, 1998): impoverished, beleaguered and misunderstood 'Cinderella Service' (Randle and Brady, 1997) surviving irregular bouts of marketisation, de-professionalisation and managerialism. The sector for years seemed to have higher levels of industrial strife than other public sector organisations. For at least 2 of the 10 years during the 1990s, more working days were lost through strike activity in FE than in any other part of the economy (Williams, 2003). In 2015, when Hodgson (2015) published a book celebrating FE having 'come of age', there was no hint of absurdity in the claim. FE as we currently understand it, despite one of its many possible starting points being the 1870 Education Act which introduced the concept of general elementary education for all, was accepted as having 'come of age'. The sector's 21 years of existence (1992–2013) was accepted as a celebratory milestone. Such is the significance of 1992.

So, to read an article written about Further and Higher Education before 1992 was of enormous interest. I was expecting to read about a golden age. Pre-1992 is usually imagined as a longed-for age of professional freedom, one in which lecturers, students and managers were all productively engaged in happy collaboration. But the signs of what was to come were there. Even in 1988, the signs of fissure were evident. Locke is of course focused on polytechnics and large FE colleges. The wave of change soon engulfed the entire FE sector.

Written by Michael Locke, a research fellow at North East London Polytechnic, the article muses on the

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possibility that a recently published report by the National Advisory Body for Public Sector Higher Education might lead to institutions being separated from the local authority. Indeed, its strapline was ‘will the NAB report into Good Management Practice lead to the separation of polytechnics and larger colleges from local authorities’. There is an unexpected echo here. All too often when scholars refer to that moment, the Act of 1992, they reference the severance of institution and local community, as constituting a freedom, ‘Freedom from local authority control’ (Bryan and Hayes, 2007; Lowe and Gayle, 2010; Ranson et al., 2001) with its bureaucratic culture and democratic accountability. Locke’s article notices the importance of this severance. When the Conservative Government, having been in office for 13 years, passed the 1992 Act, it merely took advantage of a degree of discontent that had been bubbling away for some time. The problems, according to Locke in 1988, revolved around local authorities meddling in the internal affairs of institutions. It was imagined that more effective management would become possible only when there was clearer separation between local authority and college. I wonder if Locke would have imagined, 31 years later after several acts of parliament, several shape-shifting reiterations from Cinderella (Randle and Brady, 1997) to Dancing Princess (Daley et al., 2015), that policymakers would reintroduce the meddling bureaucracy of a local authority through the undemocratic and unaccountable mega-college? I am not suggested a neat historical parallel. There are substantial differences between contemporary mega-colleges and pre-incorporation colleges managed by a local authority – the analysis of which is beyond the scope of this article. I am instead noting the bureaucratic control from which colleges were ostensibly freed in 1992 is compromised by the emergence of large college groups (Godfrey and Elliott, 2020).

It is not impossible that if pushed Locke might have predicted this outcome. Not only did he underline the significance of incorporation, but he seems to have had a sharp eye on its probable impact. In 1998, the dangers of privatisation for FE were evident and at this early stage Unions were concerned about whether conditions of service and pension rights would be sustained.

There is however a notable time resonant difference. The article makes several references to things ‘managerial’. I see the word and am reminded of just how mercurial words and their attached meanings are, changing with disruptive speed. There is an innocence attached to the way the article uses the word managerial. It has none of the dystopian intensity associated with New Public Management (Clarke and Newman, 1997). Locke may have had foresight and vision to notice the significance of a policy change sketched in a white paper which once extended to FE sector 4 years later had profound consequences. But within a decade, an everyday word ‘managerial’ was completely re-signified. The changes that surround it invoke an FE sector that none of us – not even the policymaker with their fantasies of control – could have imagined.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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## Author biography

**Carol Azumah Dennis** is Programme leader for the Doctor in Education (EdD) at the Open University. She started working in Higher Education in 2010 after a career in Further Education Colleges.