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### Citation

Addis, Mark (2024). Supporting College Strategy Through Social Partnership and Organisational Culture. In: Chrispin, Lucy; Terry, Rachel and Fletcher-Saxon, Jo eds. *Staying with the Troublemakers: A Celebration of Research in FE*. London, UK: Learning and Skills Research Network, pp. 13–15.

### URL

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# Supporting college strategy through social partnership and organisational culture

**Mark Addis**

*Mark Addis is Associate Dean Knowledge Exchange at the Open University and a Research Associate at the Centre for Philosophy of Natural and Social Science at the London School of Economics. He was a Visiting Professor at the Department of Culture and Society at Aarhus University. Mark has published in the areas of Wittgenstein, epistemology, and the philosophies of mind and science. He has applied research about know-how and know-that to issues regarding how vocational education and training should be designed and delivered.*

## What is the problem?

This paper argues that English vocational education and training could benefit from adopting and embedding social partnership models, especially ones in which further education colleges have a local and regional anchoring role. The benefits of establishing a coordinated skills system providing coherent local, regional and national pathways for vocational, technical and skilled work will be considered.

In 2022, an article that I jointly authored with Norman Crowther of the National Education Union and Christopher Winch of King's College London, summarised the institutional and cultural challenges further education colleges have faced in recent history (for more information see Crowther *et al.* 2022). The article argued that these challenges show that major change is necessary to create and ensure a coherent and sustainable further education sector. However, the action colleges need to take now and in the future is constrained by their policy framework, funding provisions, and local circumstances. A key objective in articulating these issues was to support the rapid development of systematic, strategic and wide ranging changes to the current vocational education and training system. We welcome the opportunity to apply our thinking and ideas in the real world context of further education, as such dialogue would greatly improve our understanding of the challenges colleges face and thus the available strategic possibilities.

In practice, further education policy is in tension, as most colleges attempt to manage both the long term decline of English vocational education and training provision (and concomitant unsuccessful

reform attempts to deal with this), and very wide range of teaching they are expected to deliver. Such teaching can range from the most basic preparation for work, to remedial literacy and numeracy, through to technical courses at various levels up to and including Level 7. In addition to this, teaching also covers supporting apprenticeships and taking on the main responsibility for the new flagship vocational qualification, the T Level, as well as teaching A Levels. The post war conception that the priority for colleges is to support their local economy through its students and staff has become problematic, as they will normally have many other interests in addition to ones related to their locality.

Financial pressures have markedly reshaped the sector with major trends towards the mergers of colleges into larger colleges and college groups. Although the mergers may have gone some way towards the rationalisation of provision, this has been at the cost of local accessibility, thereby raising the issues of local and regional transport links. The recent 2021 White Paper Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth proposals seem designed to deal with at least some of the perceived governance mistakes of the past. First, the government seems to recognise that vocational education needs to be integrated with economic development rather than be treated as a stand alone business sector. Second, there is some recognition that there needs to be more cooperation between providers than currently exists, together with room for both local initiative and national direction. Given this, the key question is how can colleges assert their local and regional institutional identity for learners whilst dealing with such pressures.

## What change is needed?

### Significance of Localism

The specific place and role of further education colleges as bridging institutions between the needs of localism, the economy and civil society is noted in a number of reports arguing for the place of these colleges as anchor institutions within their communities (see for example Industrial Strategy Council 2021, Keep 2016 and The College of the Future 2020). These issues of place and role raise a number of questions:

How can localism and skills development issues highlight democratic deficits in government policy arguing for levelling up and regeneration?

How can sufficient policy emphasis be placed on institutional change and co-ordination, and equality between partners needed for successful levelling up and regeneration?

How can a suitable balance between business and labour and its supporting institutions (vocational colleges, unions, local authorities and NHS) be ensured?

How can a more effective approach to localism in the areas of institutional arrangements for local and regional economies and the specific role of further education colleges as bridging institutions between localism needs, the economy and civil society be developed?

Such analysis needs to be grounded upon ideas about social partnership and the political thought about civil society which underpins much of this.

### Social Partnership and Conceptions of Civil Society

Important recent debate has recognised the significance of social partnership in further education for developing new approaches to English vocational education and training. There is international evidence, notably but not exclusively from Germany, of the contribution which well established social partnerships between employers, unions and government can make to the effective delivery of vocational education and training (Clarke and Winch 2015; Conchon 2013; Streeck 1992). English vocational education and training can benefit from adopting and embedding social partnership models, especially ones in which further education colleges have a local and regional anchoring role. Better social partnership arrangements require a much clearer sense of who further education college students are and what they are seeking educationally and occupationally. It helps partners, the workforce, and the college to devise better ways of supporting local and regional developments.

## What are the key takeaways?

We believe the following strategic framework may help guide discussion. Accepting that civil life should be both part of economic regeneration and democratic accountability (Cruddas 2021; Lockey and Wallace-Stephens 2020) necessitates serious consideration around institutional governance. As an anchor institution, the civic role of the college is enhanced, so for instance a strategic overview might consider:

The college as an institution in terms of its relationship to the state and market, to the local and regional community and actors, and to other educational sectors and actors including new actors if required. Part of this is having a strategic understanding and identification of what it means to be an anchor institution.

College governance arrangements through adopting a social partnership model which brings both unions and business into the core of college governance and policy, and that develops a social partnership model drawing on local and regional union and business interests plus other civil and local institutions including new potential institutions. This requires the creation of a focused role and mode of engagement, and a college ethos that is part of its organisational culture and found in its partner relations.

Social partnership agreements with the college trade unions and others in order to establish relations of trust and robust networks for sustainable working. Guidance for developing this kind of collegiate agreement where colleges have merged or there are larger groupings of colleges is important as to date these parts of the sector have not readily entered into agreements of this kind.

How a college aims to strategically foster better and clearer local, regional and national pathways for technical and skilled work integrating universities (either as vocational partners or vocational universities), employer training, the school curriculum and careers as part of a national vocational system. The overall objective here is to create a sense of belonging for learners in each and every college.

## Further recommended reading

Crowther, N., Addis, M. and Winch, C., 2022. Developing English VET through social partnership in further education. *London Review of Education*, 20 (1), 32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.20.1.32>.

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