

# THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

## Learn to love colleges – before they disappear

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Empty seats. Fiona Skinner, CC BY-SA

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It's the start of a new term again at further education colleges across the UK, but it must be difficult for many students and staff to be enthusiastic about the year ahead. The whole college system is going through its biggest period of reform since the 1990s. Much of it is drastic and irreversible, and few outside the sector appear to be paying much attention.

British colleges are nothing less than a powerhouse for the economy. They support a surprising range of multi-billion pound industries, including motoring, construction, oil and gas, catering, tourism and health and beauty. There will be a college graduate supporting crucial functions within nearly every organisation.

Colleges also employ highly-skilled staff who are currently fighting to maintain conditions and quality of provision. They have had to live with 10% budget cuts on average across the UK over the last six years in the face of government austerity.

Wales and more recently Scotland have been at the forefront of reform by merging numerous institutions to form larger regional colleges. One example, Edinburgh College, was formed from the mergers of Stevenson, Jewel and Esk and Telford colleges in 2012.



Former Jewel and Esk Valley college in east Edinburgh. Geograph, CC BY-SA

Now England is undergoing a similar process, with the UK government carrying out phased area reviews since last year. Where the Scottish and Welsh governments' proposals were largely sold as providing a regionalised response to industry and community needs with a more streamlined offering, England has added an explicit mandate to reduce costs. The proposals cite the need for resilient and efficient larger organisations to help tackle the country's financial deficit.

The English public would do well to look north and west to see how their two neighbours have fared. In Scotland, the reforms do not appear to be making colleges better placed to serve industry. Scotland is predicting annual savings of £50m by 2020, around 10% of total spend, though this doesn't take account of merger costs such as redundancies.

The price is a 9% drop in full-time equivalent staff, reduced student numbers (for example a 41% drop in over 25s studying) and severe cuts to courses – including a 48% reduction in part-time courses between 2009 and 2015. Budgets are down 18% in the past six years – well in excess of the UK average.

## Gone unnoticed

If the college sector is to be the cornerstone of economic recovery in the UK, it is hard to see how a sector crippled by such swingeing funding cuts can respond effectively. Yet the lack of objection from the wider public has been striking.

The only significant protests have been by college staff, including strikes over pay and conditions – recent industrial action in Scotland for college support workers being the

latest example. There has been commentary in the further education press, but that is largely read only within the sector. It doesn't seem to have filtered through to the national consciousness.



Canteen at City of Glasgow College. Gavin Ritchie, CC BY-SA

So why have the restructuring and funding cuts largely gone unnoticed? Why are there not debates in pubs and offices the length of the country? If funding had been cut in schools in this way, there would be public outcry. Or imagine what would happen if you reduced part-time university places by 48%. Schools and universities have seen cuts to government funding in recent years, too, but they have been less severe. And where universities can offset government cuts with student fees, including lucrative international ones, UK colleges are free at the point of use.

In terms of perception, the difference with schools is arguably that most of us went to one. Even if we didn't enjoy it, we fundamentally understand their (supposed) purpose and accept it as part of our national structure. And all the way through school, we hear about universities. Indeed, schools are in many ways structured to lead us there, offering students a progression towards the A-levels or Highers in their senior years that will equip them for first year at university.

The UK has placed such value on higher education that nearly 40% of school leavers now go directly on to become university undergraduates – vastly more than a generation ago. Arguably one result has been that further education has suffered from a crisis in prestige and a lack of public understanding of its critical role in supporting the economy.



Who better? Mega Pixel

## Misunderstood colleges

Further education can feel like a lesser cousin, a place for those supposedly not good enough to study elsewhere. This is simply not true. The UK's colleges provide some of the greatest learning opportunities and life chances available within the education system.

Apprenticeships in skilled disciplines supported by time-served and highly-valued experts in colleges are far more important than the UK as a nation recognises. Providing second-chance education to adults is also critical. In particular, it entails lifelong access to learning for impoverished communities. Neither schools nor universities are equipped to provide these services.

It is time to get excited about our colleges and start demanding that our government does much more to protect them. It is not wrong to change a system or sector – far from it. But change needs to be sustainable and delivered for the right reasons, and it is currently unclear if this is really the case with UK colleges. Without a groundswell in national support, I fear that one day we will wake up to find they have all but disappeared.

England Apprenticeships Scotland Wales Further education