

The impact of austerity in Further Education: cross-cultural perspectives from England and Ireland

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Abstract

The financial meltdown of 2008 triggered the most far-reaching recession in almost a century, sending shockwaves across the globe. ‘Greedy bankers’ and stock market brokers are often apportioned the blame for the crisis, yet to date it is public sector workers who have suffered most from the subsequent fallout with millions losing their jobs and many more forced to accept pay cuts and pay freezes. This chapter explores how austerity has affected those working in Further Education (FE)ⁱ in England and Ireland and considers what this reveals about the standing of this sector in both countries.

Introduction

The financial crisis of 2008 heralded the advent of an ‘austerity’ agenda by many international governments, characterised by a series of cuts to public spending and tax increases. Since then, austerity measures in England and Ireland have left an indelible mark on the FE landscapes in both countries. In Ireland, the global credit crunch has had a crippling effect on the economy, resulting in a public finance crisis that saw unemployment rise rapidly, culminating in a financial bailout by the European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2010. In England, FE has borne the brunt of the government’s austerity agenda more than any other education sector. Since 2010 FE colleges have endured repeated cuts to their budgets, resulting in the closure of courses, departments and ongoing mass redundancies, whilst schools have remained relatively unaffected with their funding ring-fenced. Yet the impact of this instability on the FE workforce in these two countries remains under-researched and underreported, making it all the more important to capture the voices of those who have been directly affected. From senior management to teaching and support staff, the cascading effects of austerity have been palpable at all levels. Drawing on interview and documentary data from recent research, this chapter explores the impact of government austerity on the lives of the FE workforce and the communities they serve, while also reflecting on the importance of FE and its role in the education systems of both countries.

The chapter starts with a brief overview of the FE sectors in each country, comparing similarities and differences between the two. It then moves on to highlighting the consequences of government austerity from a policy perspective, leading into an exploration and discussion of research data that captures what this has meant for those working in FE, its impact on their professional lives and the students they cater for. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the current status of FE and how the changes experienced as a result of austerity are likely to shape its future course.

An overview of Further Education in England and Ireland

There are many similarities between FE in England and Ireland but equally some notable differences between the two countries. **Table 1** below provides a snapshot of some of the key differences and similarities.

Similarities	Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Diversity of provision</i> – e.g. basic skills, apprenticeships, work-based learning, community provision, offender learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Sector Name</i> – Ireland = Further Education and Training (FET); England = Further Education (FE)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Flexibility of provision</i> – full-time and part-time courses, daytime, evening and weekend 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Age of students</i> – Ireland = 18+; England = 14+
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Curriculum</i> – vocationally-focused rather than academically-focused curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Governance</i> – Ireland = highly decentralised; England = highly centralised
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Employability</i> – focus/links to employment and the demands of the labour market 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Qualifications for teaching staff</i> – Ireland = mandatory qualifications include a Teaching Council approved teacher education qualification and a first degree; England = no mandatory qualifications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Social inclusion</i> – key role in promoting social inclusion through learning and training of ‘non-traditional’ students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Monitoring and evaluation</i> – Ireland = lack of history of established systems of monitoring and evaluation; England = longstanding history of system of monitoring and evaluation via inspections and reviews
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Identity issues</i> – lack of clearly defined identity compared to schools and universities 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Status</i> – perception of being of lower status than academic route of schools and universities 	

Table 1 – A comparison of similarities and differences of FE in England and Ireland

Ireland

The term FET (Further Education and Training) is used in Ireland to encompass Further Education, Vocational Education and Vocational Education and Training (VET). FET is often used interchangeably with VET, depending on the perspective. FET embraces education and training that occurs after second-level schooling and mainly in the further and continuing education sector, though FET also occurs in some Higher Education (HE) establishments.

The most recent legislation, which marked the establishment of the National Further Education & Training Authority known as SOLAS (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna) and ETBs (Education & Training Boards) was in 2013 and covered FET but not VET specifically. In reality this covers vocational education and training, which includes the PLC (Post Leaving Certificate), LCVP (Leaving Cert Vocational Programme), LCA (Leaving Cert Applied) awards and qualifications, adult learning, community education, and vocational training, apprenticeships, on-the-job training, CPD (Continuing Professional Development), internships, other training programmes and labour activation schemes.

Figure 1 below illustrates the Irish education system, outlining FET pathways. A distinctive feature of FET generally is its diversity and breadth of provision and its links with other services such as employment, training, area partnership welfare, youth, school, juvenile liaison, justice

and community and voluntary sector interests. Coincidentally, a wide range of government departments, statutory agencies and voluntary and community based organisations provide services in this area, which adds a greater complexity to the educational system as a whole.

FET in Ireland is not only about employability, it also espouses the key concepts of lifelong learning. It is seen both in policy and structural terms as being one of the main pillars essential to the building and maintenance of a highly skilled work force operating within a knowledge society (e.g. Harper and Fox 2003).

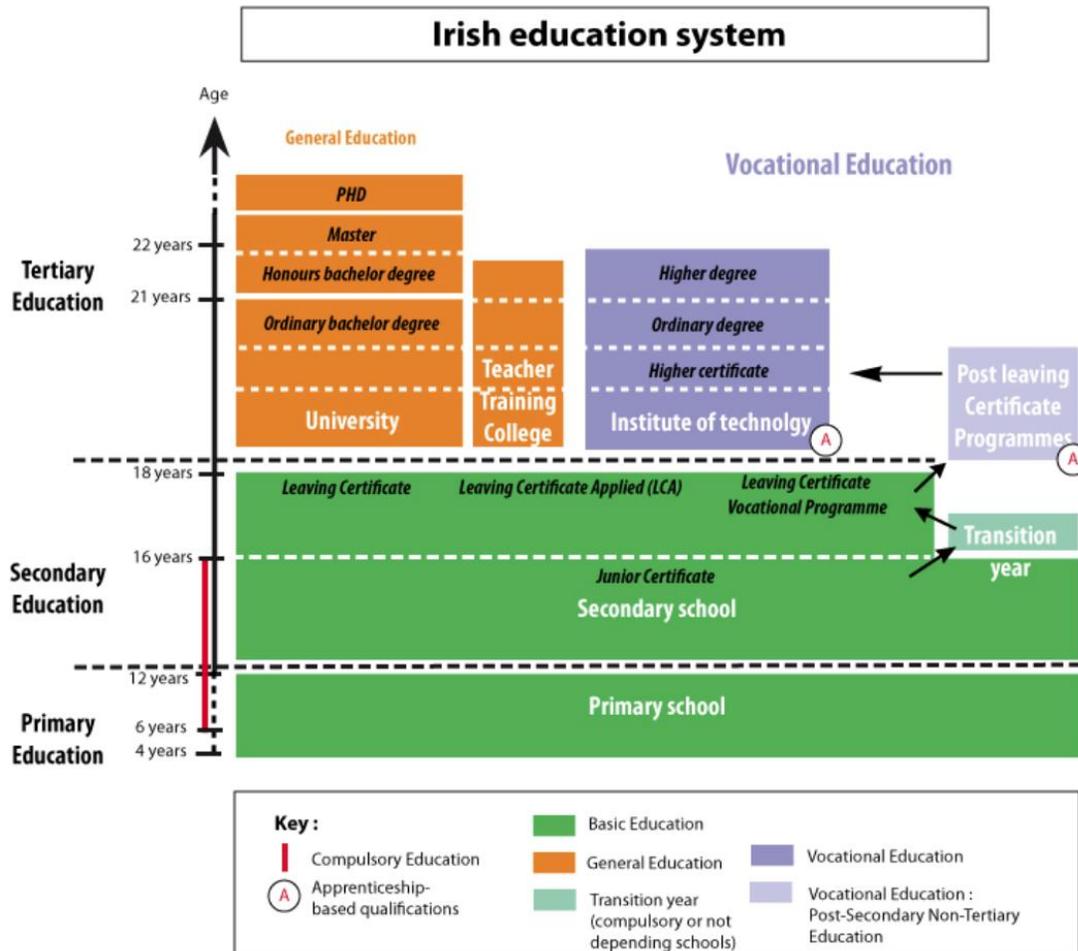


Figure 1 – Overview of the Irish Education System outlining the vocational education and training pathways (Source: Onisep/Elise Veteau 2013)

Due to the competitive entry requirements for HE, every year a fraction of students opt to remain in upper secondary education in order to improve their performance in the final year exams with the overall aim of eventually gaining entry to their chosen course in HE. Thus traditionally, for those completing second level education in Ireland, HE has been the preferred destination for further study or training, with 51% of Ireland's 25-34 year-olds holding a degree level qualification (Condon, McNaboe & Burke 2014).

The FET sector is perceived by some stakeholders as being less clearly defined and of lower status than HE (e.g. ESRI 2014). This also echoes wider social norms, but can also be seen as a reflection of the diversity of FET in terms of the perceptions of current provision. One of the stated aims of the Irish government during austerity was to implement the establishment of a new further/vocational education and training authority (SOLAS). One of the primary objectives of this new authority is to radically enhance the image of FET amongst Ireland's school leavers, their parents/guardians and career guidance professionals (SOLAS 2014: 12).

With the introduction of SOLAS in 2013 came a drive to join the 'T' of training with the 'FE' of Education. The most significant development initiated by SOLAS has been the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019. Though the data derived from our research would suggest that there are still legacy issues delaying the acceptance of this paradigm shift from FE to FET. In Education Matters Year Book 2015-2016, Dr Bryan Field from SOLAS wrote:

All of the good work that has taken place in 2015 to fully integrate the 'FE' and the 'T' – and it is substantial – is aimed at improving learner access and outcomes for all who will engage in FET so that they too can fulfil their potential and meet their career employment, personal or developmental aspirations. The FET Strategy points the way forward.

FET in Ireland has often been seen as the 'poor relation' of HE, with the latter dominating the headlines in the national media. Support for FET tends to come from those championing the 'economic' imperative over its 'social inclusion' agenda. A particular characteristic of the Irish FET system is the promotion of the interdependence of the objectives of economic development and social inclusion. Thus social forces have always been viewed as key drivers in the promotion of a lifelong learning agenda in Ireland, alongside the economic factors.

England

The FE sector in England caters for over 3 million students annually. Like FE in Ireland, it sits between schools and universities, including all post-compulsory education and training outside of HE. Yet unlike schools and universities, where there is a common understanding of their remit, purpose and target communities, FE remains an enigma to many politicians and policy makers, as indeed it does to the majority of the population. This is in part due to the way in which the identities of many FE colleges and providers have morphed and become more heterogeneous over the last three decades as a result of the marketisation of the sector. Another key factor is the lack of a coherent national policy for FE and the ongoing 'strategic drift' (Green and Lucas 1999) that has characterised successive government interventions in the sector since the early 1990s. Underpinning this strategic incoherence are fundamental questions concerning who FE is for and what its primary purpose is.

Whilst there are similarities in the curriculum offered in FE and schools with both providing education for teenagers, there are noticeable differences between the two. For example, FE offers a wide range of vocational subjects, work-based learning and community provision. In contrast to schools, FE also caters for a large population of adult returners to learning, often looking to improve their qualifications and/or gain new skills later in life. With a diverse populace of students from all parts of the community and comprising all social groups, FE providers are typically inclusive institutions and have an important role to play in enhancing social integration

and social mobility in England as indeed they do in Ireland. The ‘diversity’ and ‘complexity’ commonly associated with the English FE sector (Huddleston and Unwin 2013) also extends to the scale of its organisations with some large colleges catering for over 15,000 full-time and part-time students, compared to small private training providers with less than 50 students.

In England, the FE sector’s links to the economy and the position it has traditionally been perceived to occupy between education and the workplace has featured repeatedly in education policy in recent decades. Much of this policy has attributed a largely instrumentalist role to FE, linking it to economic well-being and positioning it as a sector that is readily disposed to meet the perceived skills’ needs of the country’s workforce (e.g. DfES 2002; Foster 2005; Leitch 2006). This has resulted in recurring policy interventions. As Keep (2014) argues, investment in education and training in the sector has been a mainstay of successive government policy over the last quarter of a century, largely driven by labour market demands and social inclusion considerations. Broadly speaking, the rationale for this policy focus has been fuelled by the need to improve workers’ skills to enable them to compete on the global stage, as evidenced by influential studies such as the Leitch Review of Skills (2006). By upskilling the workforce, it is assumed that not only would this improve its international skills standing, but it would also have a positive impact on increasing levels of productivity and boost the economy (Keep, Mayhew and Payne 2006). Yet evidence to date suggests that not only has this failed to happen in England but that it has slipped further down the international skills’ league tables (e.g. Keep 2014).

Policy perspectives on austerity in Further Education

England

Shortly after the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government entered office in 2010, George Osborne, the chancellor at the time, unveiled the biggest public spending cuts the country had seen for decades. Buoyed by widespread support in sections of the media and the public, Osborne introduced a sustained period of austerity, using a ‘common sense’ argument that blamed the previous Labour government for spending beyond its means while in power (Spours 2015). Osborne announced that drastic cuts needed to be made to public spending in order to tackle the country’s burgeoning deficit.

Since 2010 FE has experienced a sustained programme of cuts, impacting directly on providers and the infrastructure of the sector as a whole. As a House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts remarked towards the end of 2016, FE has ‘experienced a real-terms funding cut of 27% in the last 5 years’ (HC 414 2016: para 8, p. 8).

The practical impact of these cuts has been an extensive catalogue of savings measures in 16-18 education in FE colleges (AoC 2014), made all the more challenging given that FE has historically been ‘funded less generously than 11-16 schooling’ (Wolf 2015: 15). Wolf goes on to state that ‘its shrinking share of total education funding indicates that it is not, in practice, a top priority for governments’ (Ibid). And the forecast for the coming years offers little hope of improvement, with some predicting that the overall reduction in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills’ (BIS) budget from 2010 to 2018 will total 43% (e.g. Keep 2014).

Throughout the government's austerity agenda, schools have remained relatively unaffected with much of their funding ring-fenced. In contrast, FE has experienced year on year cuts since 2010 (AoC 2014). Like secondary schools, FE colleges in England cater predominantly for teenage students, which inevitably raises the question as to why the sector has been repeatedly targeted and schools have escaped such treatment. Has the government's austerity programme in FE been solely driven by financial factors or are there other interests at play? The government maintains that its rationale for targeting FE has been based on a model of financial reasoning designed to make efficiency savings, although there are some researchers who question this.

Spours (2015: 13), for example, suggests that austerity is an 'ideologically driven agenda rather than economically necessary measures' and argues that the burden of austerity has been spread unevenly across the population in order to protect the Conservatives' core voters and to 'push policies they [the Conservatives] always desired but did not think were possible in normal circumstances' (Jones 2015: xix). Other researchers in the field have suggested that no one in Whitehall actually cares about FE (e.g. Coffield 2015). This is an argument that appears to be rooted in class divisions and/or interests and the perceived invisibility of FE in some circles. In other words, FE is a sector that has traditionally catered to the needs of working class communities and remains largely invisible to others, especially politicians and policy makers, though it has to be said that this is not a new argument. Almost 20 years' ago, in her seminal report on FE, Helena Kennedy wrote that:

Further education suffers because of prevailing British attitudes ... there is an appalling ignorance among decision makers and opinion formers about what goes on in further education. It is so alien to their experience' (Kennedy 1997: 1).

Twenty years later, little appears to have changed. Such ignorance or what some might even regard as contempt for FE is not unusual amongst the establishment. In drawing on the work of King and Crewe (2013) to exemplify their notion of 'cultural disconnect', a term used to describe politicians and civil servants dealing with 'values, attitudes and whole ways of life that are not remotely like their own' (p. 244), Coffield (2015) provides a pertinent example of 'cultural disconnect' in citing an occasion when Boris Johnson – then shadow higher education minister – delivered a speech to a group of FE principals and senior managers at a conference in Cambridge. Unsure of who his audience was, he stopped half way through his speech to ask who it was he was addressing. Once enlightened by one of the principals present, he paused for a moment and replied, 'Ah, I know who you all are. You used to be called Secondary Moderns'. In a similar vein, Vince Cable recounted that in the early days of the coalition government, civil servants in his department wanted to axe FE completely in order to save money, arguing that 'nobody will really notice' (Wheeler 2014).

Another factor that has ostensibly contributed to FE bearing the burden of the government's austerity programme is that traditionally it has not had the lobbying presence in parliament afforded to that of schools and the HE sector. As such, it is arguably easier for politicians and policy makers to dismiss it as a budgetary burden as Wolf (2015) has suggested.

Ireland

Ireland was significantly impacted by one of the most severe economic and social shrinkages in the international and European financial crisis. As Ahearne (2015: 4) comments:

The banking crash was one of the largest in modern history and the costs of the crisis were being imposed by both Irish governments and the IMF/EU/ECB ‘Troika’ on to the majority of the population - low and middle income households.

A series of austerity budgets were implemented in Ireland from 2008 to 2014, along with an accompanying set of conditions imposed as part of the international bailout from 2010 to 2013. Most of these included cuts to public spending and social welfare, along with a number of tax increases (some of these in the form of stealth taxes), predominantly on middle and low income households, of over €30 billion (Ahearne 2015).

Mercille and Murphy (2015: 4) maintain that:

Ireland has been a poster child for the implementation of fiscal consolidation. Whereas a number of countries initially responded to the 2008–9 financial crisis through Keynesian measures, Ireland immediately started to implement austerity on its own.

The austerity reforms happened in the context of a €67.5 billion EU-IMF bailout, which conditionality required ‘structural reforms’, in particular, within the public sector and education. Though Ireland has since left the bailout programme it is still subject to regular monitoring from the EMF (European Monetary Fund) and the IMF, and austerity continues to be implemented (ibid). The scale of this change should not be understated. Between 2008 and 2015, it has amounted to approximately 20% of the Irish GDP, almost €32 billion, of which 30% has been accounted for by spending cuts and tax increases (Fiscal Advisory Council 2014: 9).

Austerity measures have purportedly had a considerable impact on attracting new teachers into the profession. The Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) warned that it would be forced to consider industrial action unless progress was made on restoring pay allowances for teachers new to the profession. Qualification allowances were removed from teachers entering the profession after February 2012. The union claims this amounted to a pay cut of approximately 20% for some. Since July 2016, however, there have been significant developments. Officials from the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and union representatives have had a series of meetings to discuss the issues relating to pay arrangements for newly qualified teachers recruited since 1 February 2012. These discussions took place within the provisions of the Lansdowne Road Agreement and the TUI/DES Agreement of May 2016. The government announced that, ‘contingent on the introduction of certain reform measures, a new incremental salary scale will be developed which is designed to address the current difference in pay for teachers recruited since 1 February 2012’ (DES 2016: [Page?-p.1](#)) The implementation of the revised salary arrangement is due to be implemented in two phases on 1 January 2017 and 1 January 2018. The effect of this will be to assimilate all post-1 January 2011 and post-1 February 2012 new entrants to teaching onto a single new salary scale which will incorporate the honours primary degree allowance. This new arrangement will

apply to members of the teachers' unions that have signed up to the Lansdowne Road Agreement.

Workforce perspectives on the impact of austerity in Further Education

Nineteen individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and over the telephone with a range of staff working at all levels in the FE sector. The interview sample included college principals, senior and middle managers, lecturers, tutors, learning support staff as well as guidance counsellors and Youth Reach coordinators from a broad sample of providers across England and Ireland. In capturing the voices of differing members of the FE workforce, this section seeks to illuminate some of their lived experiences and reflects on how, individually and collectively, they have dealt with a period of tumultuous change. It also seeks to draw attention to some of the difficulties and concerns facing those working in FE in the light of a sustained period of austerity and how this has impacted on the work they do.

Fear, resentment and uncertainty

As a result of having to manage significantly reduced budgets, many FE colleges in England have found themselves with little choice but to make savings in fixed costs such as salaries. One of the ways in which some colleges have responded to this is by introducing term-time only contracts, as Michael, a learning support assistant describes:

Another way they're saving money is paying people only in term time. Previously some staff would be on a full-time, permanent contract with paid holiday entitlement. So instead of having a year-long contract they've introduced these new contracts, which some people have had to sign or risk losing their job completely ... the new style contracts mean that staff only get paid for working term time.

This trend is reflected in a recent report released by one of the main teaching unions for the sector, the University and College Union (UCU) entitled *Precarious work in further education* (UCU 2016), which claims that over a third of teaching staff in the sector are employed on what the report refers to as 'precarious contracts' i.e. hourly paid, variable hours or term-time only contracts.

Gurnam, a business studies lecturer, described a climate of continuous uncertainty and instability in his workplace, with all departments going through an internal review in order to rationalise provision and from which there seemed to be two discernible outcomes. The first being redundancy and the second a revised job role with an increase in workload and responsibilities, yet often together with a salary freeze, or even a cut in salary in some cases.

There's definitely a degree of fear. The principal warned everyone that the area reviews were coming and that we would try and predict the outcomes by exploring a merger with another local college but at the same time he said that there were going to be job losses as a result of the reviews. Ever since then there's been a continuous period of uncertainty as everyone's thinking, 'I wonder who'll be next or which department will be next' ... We're also seeing a significant increase in peoples' additional duties.

Job uncertainty and the fear of being made redundant are conditions that have increasingly come to be associated with working in FE in England since the days of incorporation but appear to

have become more accentuated during the period of austerity (e.g. Lucas and Crowther 2016; O’Leary and Smith 2012).

In Ireland, the research revealed a perception amongst FET staff that the value of their work was not fully appreciated by the government and this had led to a general erosion of motivation amongst some working in the sector.

There is great resentment among people at what they perceive (rightly in my view) as the great undervaluing of FET teachers in comparison with mainline teachers. Salaries and conditions of employment in the FE sector are greatly inferior to those of mainstream teachers. (Deputy Principal of a Second Level FE School)

People are doing their job. From people I have spoken to, the sense of unfairness in our treatment in relation to teachers in our own sector has led many people to take a step back from the job. Whereas before, we would have, as a matter of course, put in extra hours and effort, now we do what we have to and no more. Many people in Youthreach would have put in extra hours even before the Croke Park and Lansdowne Road Agreementsⁱⁱ. For many, it is now less of a vocation and more of a job (Youthreach Coordinator)

Doing more with less and the consequences for staff and students

Gina, a faculty director from a college in the north of England, talked of the need ‘to do whatever it takes to get through a difficult time’ and was acutely aware of how ‘that doesn’t seem fair on staff because it means a lot more work for them’ but when faced with reduced resources there was a need ‘to tighten your belt and all pull together’.

The notion of ‘do[ing] whatever it takes’ manifested itself in a number of different ways for teaching and support staff, many of which seemed to result in increased workloads and extra responsibilities. As Sally, a programme manager for health and social care, succinctly remarked, ‘it’s about doing more with less’. Teaching staff were often timetabled up to and beyond their contracted hours. Traditionally 24 contact hours per week have been interpreted as the maximum for teaching staff across the sector. However, in many cases 24 hours was now being interpreted as the minimum and in some cases it was considered ‘not unreasonable to teach up to 28 hours a week’ (Bev, art and design lecturer). Participants also spoke of how class sizes had been doubled or even tripled, regardless of whether classrooms could accommodate the students.

Students also experienced the direct impact of austerity. Reduced budgets resulted in many departments demanding increased contributions from students towards the cost of resources. Invariably these are students who come from low-income families that struggle to pay their weekly household bills let alone cover any extra expenditure. According to Fazia, a hair and beauty lecturer in England, reduced budgets have resulted in departments like her own demanding increased contributions from students towards the cost of resources/equipment. Until recently such students did at least have the educational maintenance allowance (EMA) to rely on to cover these costs but this financial support was abolished by the coalition government in 2010.

Michael talked about how at his college some of the most vulnerable learners suffered directly from the cuts as specialist support was either reduced or withdrawn completely. He cited two examples of this. The first where a specialist member of staff with a cross college role in

supporting learners with severe behaviour difficulties on a one-to-one basis had their role removed. And the second of a learner with significant disability issues whose support was affected as a result of the budget cutbacks in the college. In both cases, staff were informed that the college was ‘no longer able to offer that service’ and that such specialist work would now become the responsibility of main grade lecturers.

Similarly in Ireland, staff expressed their concerns about the impact of sector reform under the auspices of austerity on the students themselves. The introduction of a government levy on students and the reduction in BTEA [Back to Education Allowance] were specific austerity measures that were identified as having a particularly negative impact on students.

The introduction of the 200 euro levy has affected the number of FE students in our college as we are located in an underprivileged area of north Dublin. The decrease in the BTEA allowance has had the same effects. The moratorium on the replacement of administration staff has had an effect on the service we can provide to students. (Senior FET Manager)

[The] cap on PLC places means that schools cannot run extra courses, even if there is demand, as they will not get a teaching allocation to run them. Also students with disabilities have to wait several months for supports as the funding from the HEA [Higher Education Authority] only comes through in November/December. (FET College Principal & Teacher)

Policy rhetoric and the remit of FE

One of the recurring themes to emerge across all participants in England was the perception that there was a lack of understanding on the part of central government and policy makers about what FE is, its underlying purpose and who the students are that study in it. For example, the failure to understand the needs of the local communities FE serves through the imposition of centrally driven policies, regardless of what those local needs might be. This is captured poignantly in the following comment by Richard, a principal with over 30 years’ experience in the sector:

FE colleges are part of the very fabric of local communities. I don’t think the government understand that at all. They don’t realise the role the sector plays in helping to create rounded individuals. They just see the purpose of FE as a factory for producing skills.

Two examples of this failure to understand the sector and the disconnect between policy rhetoric and reality were prevalent in the data in relation to the funding for apprenticeships and the advanced learner loans.

Senior managers expressed their frustrations of how government ministers would talk publicly about responding to the demands of the market and local economic needs, yet the reality of centralised funding diktat meant that they were unable to use funding flexibly to meet the specific needs of students and their local communities. Contrary to the claims that ‘the apprenticeship levy and advanced learner loans allowed colleges to develop sustainable business models with less reliance on government funding’ (Ratcliffe 2016), many senior managers

commented on their reluctance to want to commit to significant investment in areas where future funding remained uncertain and lacked assurances from the government.

This lack of understanding about the sector, along with it playing second fiddle to schools, was not peculiar to England but also seemed to be the case in Ireland as the following comment from a college principal reinforces:

... reform is not complete because FET colleges still operate under second level procedures and the DES has a poor understanding of FET colleges and it is preoccupied with traditional schooling. Most civil servants are products of traditional secondary schools. The fragmented nature of the sector makes it difficult to get decisions and agreements related to FET. Often the decisions taken are for secondary schools and FET colleges are an afterthought. (FET College Principal)

Michael Moriarty, general secretary of Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and president of the European Federation of Education Employers has argued that:

The attractiveness and capacity of the further education and training (FET) sector need to be improved ... We've been arguing for five years for a capital budget for the sector, not just to build or renovate colleges, but to fit them out with equipment to train people for jobs of today and the future. (Murray 2016).

Moriarty went on to criticise the government imposed limits on PLC places, claiming that they restrict the ability of FET providers to cater for more students who are seeking to complete second-level education.

Concluding comments

The impact of austerity and the systemic reforms implemented across FE in both countries have been significant and far-reaching. In the case of Ireland, austerity measures have arguably been a catalyst for wider reform to a sector that has historically been underpinned by an ad-hoc structure lacking in strategic vision, and one that aspires to develop a greater coherence between the values of social and cultural capital with the need for a strong economy. The creation of the new national strategy for Further Education and Training 2014-2019 (SOLAS 2013) is designed to play a key role in meeting the needs of individual students and equally the government's economic policy. It is still early days and whether it succeeds in fulfilling both aims remains to be seen.

In England the current situation in FE seems less optimistic. In a recent House of Commons report, the public accounts committee report concluded that, 'the declining financial health of many further education colleges has potentially serious consequences for learners and local economies' (HC414 2015: 3). As some senior leaders in the sector have commented, current policy is disadvantaging the most disadvantaged students. Far from enhancing the life chances of these students, it is exacerbating the cycle of deprivation that is prevalent in so many of the communities that FE caters for. So, what's to be done to protect a sector that faces the most challenging period in its history?

Keep (2014: 6) warns that ‘it would be unwise to formulate plans for the future of post-compulsory skills policy that are reliant upon a reversal of the existing cuts’. In essence, what this means then is that any new investment would need to be funded by further cuts to existing budgets. Keep’s analysis carries with it a deterministic view of funding and resigned compliance. But why should it be this way? Why should the education of one part of the population be guaranteed (i.e. schools) and others discretionary, or at best, proportionate and conditional?

Since the days of Incorporation, colleges in England have had to adapt to becoming more entrepreneurial and dealing with the challenges that ongoing changes and cuts to funding have presented. Whilst many have worked hard to generate alternative sources of income, the reality is that colleges are dependent on government funding for their existence. At a time of unprecedented budget cuts in the sector, it is clear that the arrangements for planning and funding for FE need to allow greater flexibility to respond to local needs and less emphasis on nationally set targets. There is a level of complexity to the funding methodology for FE that seems unnecessarily complex and is in desperate need of a major overhaul. But this needs to form part of a wider review of funding for the sector as a whole. This is an issue that the current government needs to address sooner rather than later.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What do you know about the FE sector in your country?
2. What is the role of FE?
3. What are some of the key differences between studying at school and in a FE college/provider?
4. Who studies in the FE sector and what kind of courses do they study?
5. What are the key factors that have influenced the austerity agenda in England and Ireland?
6. What has the impact of austerity been on FE staff from front line to senior managers?
7. What is the impact of austerity on students in the sector?
8. What is the relationship between education and employment?
9. Do you think that it is the responsibility of FE to prepare students for the workplace?
10. How might practitioners in the FE sector in England and Ireland best go about influencing government policy?

Suggestions for further reading

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ⁱ The term 'FET' (Further Education and Training) is most commonly used in Ireland compared to 'FE' (Further Education) in England. For the sake of consistency, the latter will be used throughout this chapter when referring to the sector as a whole.

ⁱⁱ The Croke Park and Lansdowne Road Agreements were negotiated public sector agreements which dealt with public sector reform related to areas such as pay scales, and performance management, not all of the Teaching Unions signed up to the agreements.