

# Privatising colleges - Roger Kline

**Two new pamphlets – A Manifesto for Further Education by Sean Vernell, and Universities in a Neoliberal World, by Alex Callinicos – highlight the crisis in further and higher education, writes Roger Kline**

As further and higher education have expanded over the last four decades, conditions for students and staff have worsened. Thirty years ago there were nine students for every lecturer. Now there are 21. In further education, workloads are at record level. Casual employment is rife.

These two booklets argue that something more than the intensification of work is taking place. They say that what we are seeing is a radical change in the nature of post-16 education.

With almost half our school leavers entering university, both the work processes and the educational environment are undergoing change.

In further education, teaching staff have survived incorporation when colleges were taken out of local authority control two decades ago. However, the resultant sleaze and attacks on staff are nothing compared to what ministers are now proposing.

In the wake of last year's Leitch Report, a full-blooded market is planned with employers in the driving seat. This will involve new private sector education "providers" joining existing colleges in competition for students and funding.

## **Money**

The excellent Manifesto For Further Education initiated by London Region UCU anticipates these proposals and rightly focuses on the educational impact of such changes.

The government is already withdrawing huge sums of money from adult education in order to prioritise a narrowly vocational agenda. Hundreds of thousands of places are being cut.

At the same time, a quality inspectorate sets and audits a range of targets designed to facilitate such changes and ensure a climate of fear among both staff and their managers.

Performance management, of which the guiding principle is distrust of staff, has become the order of the day. Staff have become an object of reform, not agents of educational improvement.

As the White Paper on 14-19 year olds put it, "We will ensure that the workforce can implement what they are asked to do."

As Kwiksave further education providers undercut the Waitrose variety, employers will have to cut labour costs, not least by increased use of agency and temporary staff.

These proposals go well beyond "contestability" and the replacement of "coasting colleges" with private provision. Already major training companies such as Capita, Tribal, Carter and Carter VT Plus, Nord Anglia, and CfBT are gearing up.

Courses that attract "customers" will be prioritised whether or not they are what the country (or students) need. The curriculum will be compromised as ministers focus on skills not lifelong learning.

Instability will grow. The remaining principals who seek to be educational leaders first and business leaders second will fade away.

Alex Callinicos's pamphlet summarises changing work processes and the change of role of higher education. As the "masses" enter university, the system has become both more differentiated and unstable.

## **Market**

The changes reflect both the development of a market through top up fees and the impact of a research funding system, which favours a small number of elite universities.

The essential link between university teaching and research is being broken while the focus of research becomes subject to greater "targets" and commercial pressures.

Working class and ethnic minority students overwhelmingly go to universities that are not research intensive. As workloads intensify and the management culture increasingly emulates the bullying in further education the challenge for trade unionists in both sectors is clear.

Either we find a way to link our concerns about workloads and the educational environment with those of students and the wider society or we spend the next decade on the back foot.

The great merit of both these booklets is that they help explain the context in which the defence of pay terms and conditions can and must be linked with a challenge to the way the sector is managed.

Trade unionists rightly spend much time campaigning over what we get paid and how we are employed.

However we won't make much progress on either of those issues unless we also campaign over the education we provide and the attempts to impose a market upon us.

**Roger Kline** is head of equality and employment rights for the UCU lecturers' union.

**Universities in a Neoliberal World** by Alex Callinicos and **A Manifesto for Further Education** by Sean Vernell are available from Bookmarks, the socialist bookshop. Phone 020 7637 1848 or go to [www.bookmarks.uk.com](http://www.bookmarks.uk.com)

The manifesto can also be read online at [www.uculeft.devisland.net/fe-manifesto.html](http://www.uculeft.devisland.net/fe-manifesto.html) Support the manifesto by signing the online petition [www.petitiononline.com/londonfe/petition.html](http://www.petitiononline.com/londonfe/petition.html)

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