

AREA-BASED REVIEWS AND THEIR

AFTERMATH:

Moving to a Post-Incorporation Model for further education in England?

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Abstract

This article draws on research into the further education (FE) Area-Based Review (ABR) process in London, England over the period 2016-2018 to suggest that the significance of ABRs can be judged as to the extent they reinforce or challenge the historical marketised model of FE. The implications of ABR are viewed historically through the conceptual lens of two governance continua - market/public (economic) and centralised/devolved (political). The research, involving repeated interviews with a range of FE social partners over a three-year period, developed the concept of two inter-related logics – a dominant ‘Logic A’ focused on FE college viability and merger and a subordinate ‘Logic B’ focused on regional skills strategies and greater collaboration between social partners. The significance of ABRs is assessed in relation to the wider English policy contexts that point to a need for greater skills co-ordination. At the same time, a comparison of ABRs in England with the ‘regionalisation’ of FE colleges in the other three countries of the UK highlights its relatively unplanned character. The article concludes with a discussion around the evolving relationship between the two Logics and argues that, albeit hesitantly, FE colleges in England may be moving towards a ‘Post-Incorporation’ phase.

Key words: further education colleges, skills, technical and vocational education, devolution, UK comparisons, regions and localities

Introduction

In *Reviewing post-16 education and training institutions* (HMG 2015), the newly-elected UK Conservative Government announced its plans to support the restructure of the post-16 education and training sector through a series of Area Based Reviews (ABRs) of further education (FE) colleges in England. While FE colleges in the UK offer a wide range of full-time and part-time provision at all levels from the most basic to degree level programmes for young people from the age of 16¹ and adults of all ages, their primary focus is on technical and vocational education and second chance learning (see Hodgson et al. 2018 for more detail). However, they are not the only providers of post-16 education and training in the UK, but the ABR process in England restricted its scope to a review of these institutions.

ABRs had two related policy objectives. The first was to ‘*move towards fewer, often larger, more resilient and efficient providers*’ (p3). In effect this meant mergers between FE colleges. The second was strongly linked to the UK Government’s Productivity Plan (HMT 2015). It highlighted the importance of developing clear, high quality professional and technical routes to employment, alongside robust academic routes, which allow individuals to progress to high level skills valued by employers; and better responsiveness to local employer needs and economic priorities, for instance through local commissioning of adult provision, which will help give the sector the agility to meet changing skills requirements in the years ahead building on the agreements with Greater Manchester, London and Sheffield. (HMG 2015: 2)

¹ Some FE colleges also offer provision for 14-16 year olds, but these are a small minority.

ABRs marked a significant moment in the recent history of FE in England because these policy objectives could be seen as an admission that the marketised and competitive logic that had dominated national policy thinking for nearly 25 years had failed in two fundamental ways - to produce an efficient FE sector and one that was sufficiently responsive to employer needs. To help understand the evolution of English FE over recent decades in relation to the dominant market logic, the article employs a conceptual framework comprising two intersecting continua – market/public (economic) and centralized/devolved (political). This governance framework could be creatively applied not only to further education, but also to other education sectors and civil society bodies.

Viewed in their wider historical, policy and comparative contexts, these policy objectives raised two questions. The first was how far might ABRs resolve these issues? The second was the degree to which this policy initiative could be seen as representing a move away from FE Incorporation, in which FE colleges were freed from local government control to compete with one another for students and, while remaining dependent on national government funding, became accountable to their individual governing bodies under the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. What is particularly interesting in relation to this second question is the government's need to intervene and the explicit reference made to localities and the regional devolution agenda.

The research reported in this article covers the period 2016-2018 that included, not only the preparation for and running of the official ABR process, but also its aftermath and the establishment of post-ABR bodies – Sub-Regional Skills and Employment Boards. The

geo-political focus of the empirical research was Greater London, which at the start of the ABR process had 30 general FE colleges (GFEs) offering a wide range of general and vocational programmes for young people and adults, mainly at sub-degree level; 12 sixth form colleges (SFCs) catering primarily for 16-19 year olds and five specialist designated institutions that focused on a particular sector of the economy (e.g. land-based industries), all functioning as part of an active skills training market that also included many independent training providers. Because of its size and complexity, the ABR process in London was carried out through four sub-regional committees that worked and reported separately, although their efforts were also regionally co-ordinated. London also has its own Mayor and Greater London Authority (GLA), together with four sub-regional formations (Central, East, South and West), all of which were and are seeking a greater role in skills co-ordination. While the London education and training context has its own specificities – notably its size – the forces of skills markets and co-ordination efforts could be seen to be broadly reflective of other English regional conurbations, although not of smaller and more rural areas in England.

Multiple contexts place FE in England at the crossroads

There are three important contexts - historical, current national political/policy and regional – to be taken into account when considering the role of ABRs in terms of the evolution of FE in England. The historical context of FE College Incorporation and the policy-driven competitive and marketised behaviours across the FE sector more generally have acted as a dominant force since the early 1990s (Fletcher, Gravatt, and Sherlock 2015), although the nature of the overall governance of FE colleges and the relationship

between institutions and central government steering of the sector has shifted somewhat according to changes in the complexion of successive Westminster governments (see the theoretical framework section for the historical evolution of the governance of FE colleges).

More recently, however, in terms of wider politics and policy, there are signs of a turn away from marketisation, due to UK Prime Minister Theresa May's 'soft economic nationalism' (Pearce 2016) and the challenges of Brexit, towards a greater emphasis on collaboration for skills development. This is taking place at the same time as greater devolution of powers over skills development to combined local authorities and regional government as a result of the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act (2016). We argue that the combination of the historical, current political and devolutionary contexts has led FE colleges in England to a crossroads between a continuation of the dominant marketised approach and a transition into a 'Post-Incorporation model' (Hodgson and Spours 2015), not only in London but also more widely in England.

The English historical, political and policy contexts

The historical context for FE colleges in England has shaped fundamental beliefs and institutional behaviours. Despite shifts in the balance of governance – the relationship between central steering and institutional autonomy (see Figure 2) - the English FE sector as a whole has adopted a largely marketised and competitive stance over the past 25 years (Keep 2018). Institutional autonomy and self-preservation have been regarded as its *leitmotif*. This sectoral belief has been sustained by a Conservative Government that until recently has promoted institutional diversity and competition (DfE 2016).

In the field of FE, however, the march of marketisation has been partially undermined by a range of financial, policy and political factors that have placed increased emphasis on strategies of collaboration and co-ordination. As Doel (2018) points out, the prime decision to launch ABRs in England resulted from the UK Government policy of austerity, concerns about FE colleges' financial viability and market failure. Instead of institutional competition reducing costs, government was forced to intervene with ABRs to reduce backroom costs and the duplication of provision between FE colleges and across the post-16 sector more generally (Boles 2015).

The second context has been the wider technical and vocational policies in England in which ABRs were also seen as contributing to the reform of technical education, including the introduction of 15 new T (Technical) Level routes (DBIS/DfE 2016) and the move from apprenticeship frameworks to a new standards-based apprenticeship model (DBIS 2015).

The third policy context concerned the 'devolution agenda'. The Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 was designed to introduce directly-elected mayors to combined local authorities in England and Wales and to devolve housing, transport, planning and policing powers to them – a process known as 'devo deals'. The London devo deal also included the devolution of the Adult Education Budget (AEB), discretionary support for 19+ learners and the creation of a Skills Commissioner for London.

London ABRs in perspective

Some light can be cast on the significance of the ABRs and the London experience of them by addressing three questions.

- How might ABRs be seen within the context of English FE mergers since college incorporation in 1993?
- To what extent did the London experience of ABRs reflect that of England more widely?
- How does the English process of FE college merger compare with the experiences of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?

Historical patterns of merger – England 1993-2018

Even prior to the ABR process, the FE sector has a long history of merger. By 2018 there were a total of 263 general FE, sixth form colleges (SFCs) and specialist colleges in England compared with almost 450 in 1993 (AoC 2018). Moreover, the number of FE colleges in 1993, the year of FE Incorporation when they were taken out of local government control, was nearly half of the 800 or so that existed in the 1960s (AoC 2016). As Figure 1 illustrates, mergers appear to have come in waves with peaks in the late 1990s, the mid-2000s and now, in particular, through the ABR process 2016-18. During the ABR period and its aftermath a total of 54 college-to-college mergers took place, with 13 more planned for 2019 (AoC 2018).

Figure 1 about here

Mergers in England have been of basically two types - Type A merger where all the existing corporations are dissolved and a new one created and Type B where one corporation continues and the others are dissolved into it. Eighty per cent of mergers in England have been of Type B (AoC 2018). The historical driving forces for merger have been characterised as ‘rescue’, in which a financially weak college is amalgamated into a financially stronger institution and ‘strategic,’ in which two colleges that are already fairly successful merge because they believe they will both be stronger if combined (Calvert 2009). These historical mergers were the consequence of the dynamics of the FE market, not the result of policy. In fact, the previous Labour Government (1997-2010), while supporting new FE organisational models, did not directly advocate mergers (DIUS 2008).

That was to change in 2015 when college mergers were to become the focus of policy under ABRs. In the run up, the Conservative Government suggested that the historical pattern of the strong taking over the weak was a less attractive option for the future given the increased focus on local and sub-regional economic and skills needs (BIS 2015).

Using this historical lens, it could be argued that the official aims of ABR represented an amalgamation of the historical merger forces of ‘rescue’ (college economic viability) and ‘strategic’ (meeting local economic needs) and were on a much larger scale than the previous merger waves.

London and England – their experiences of ABR compared

While London is unique within the UK due to its size and the dynamism of its economy combined with economic and social polarization (Tinson et al. 2017), its educational

features are representative of urban England more broadly. These include a competitive post-16 market; a relatively static FE sector that has declined in terms of 16-19 participation in recent years; and low levels of apprenticeships for young people when compared internationally (Thompson, Colebrook, and Hatfield 2016). In this sense, London shared with the rest of England the basic reasons for FE ABRs - that is to make the FE sector more economically viable and to help grow the relationship between FE colleges and employers.

The wider English and London experiences of ABRs also shared a number of key features. Across England and in London the reviews took longer than the three months envisaged due to the complexity of issues being considered. In the London case, the delay was primary due to issues of co-ordination of the four different review processes taking place across the capital (Burke 2017a).

London and other areas of England also shared the basic perception of ABRs and their orientation. An evaluation study of the Birmingham & Solihull and Tees Valley ABRs, for example, found that the ‘objective to improve financial sustainability of providers takes precedence over those to meet learner and employer needs’ (Higton et al. 2018: 6); a perception that was widely shared in London from the beginning of its review processes.

By the end of the official ABR period, the number of mergers taking place across England were at the lower end of the 50-80 originally envisaged (Foster 2018). Despite the fact that London’s colleges took a very proactive stance at the beginning of the ABR

period that suggested the transformation of FE in the capital, the number of mergers that had taken place by late 2018 was also lower than anticipated. This was due primarily to a small number of the merger arrangements not proceeding as planned. (Burke 2017b).

While ABRs nationally may have fallen some way short of the ambitious merger target, the FE Commissioner still declared them a success in distinctly non-market terms, ‘Before this, local authorities, colleges and local enterprise partnerships were not sitting round the same table and now nearly every area has agreed to a strategic group to do that,’ (Burke 2017b). However, the most pressing criticisms have been that ABRs did not include all post-16 institutions and the lack of actual change on the ground (Foster 2018). In these areas too, London’s experience of ABRs echoed that of England more widely.

As with other urban conurbations, efforts are being made by local and regional government in London to try to organize a skills system to respond to a diverse population and rapidly changing economy; notably a city-wide Skills Vision (GLA 2016) and Skills Strategy (GLA 2018a). One significant difference in London, and one to which we will return later, is that the four ABRs were chaired by local authority political leaders who had a strong vested interest in improving the relationship between colleges and their local communities, particularly in relation to economic development.

‘UK Home international’ comparison – another lens on the English FE system

It is helpful when considering policy developments in England to employ ‘home international’ comparisons (Raffe et al. 1999) in order to look beyond the national

boundaries of the English FE system. The reforms of FE in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland over the last decade can act as a useful lens to view how far, if at all, the English FE system has been shifting from its historical marketized position.

College mergers have already taken place in the other three countries of the United Kingdom (UK) under the banner of ‘regionalisation’ (see Hodgson et al. 2018). In Northern Ireland in 2007, a total of 16 colleges were merged to form six ‘super’, area-based regional colleges. In Scotland in 2013 a total of 43 colleges were merged into 27 in 13 regions. In Wales since 2008, a total of 35 colleges have been merged into 13 organisations (James 2018). In both the Scottish and Welsh cases, these reforms were characterised as ‘post-Incorporation’ because of the changes to college governance that accompanied regionalisation (Hodgson and Spours 2017).

In comparison to the nationally ‘co-ordinated’ approach in the other countries of the UK, the ABR strategy in England looks relatively permissive. Despite the steering role of the FE Commissioner, college governing bodies were free to reject ABR recommendations and, it would transpire, with little financial risk. This voluntarist approach to ABR resulted in a wave of FE college mergers in London and nationally, but how far this could be seen as leading to the evolution of a more planned ‘FE system’ similar to that in the other countries of the UK remains a key question.

Research approach and theoretical framework

Stages of research 2016-2018

The three-year research project aimed to capture the views of key stakeholders as the ABR process in London evolved. The longitudinal approach to the project allowed researchers from a university research centre, in collaboration with the Association of Colleges London Region, to monitor whether and how the perceptions and actions of key actors changed over the three-year period.

The fieldwork revolved around three key research questions.

1. How did the various social partners perceive the forces behind ABRs and what hopes did they have of the process?
2. What were their perceptions of the changes that took place to FE organization in London (2016-2018) as a result of ABRs?
3. What views did they have of the post-review period and where it might lead?

The overall research approach comprised four elements: 1) analysis of national and London-based policy documents and reports on the ABR process; 2) interviews with key policy actors; 3) seminar consultations with college staff responsible for the curriculum, together with feedback seminars and conferences that also responded to published annual research reports; 4) an international comparative aspect in 2018 through a link between the London/England ABR research and a sister project 'FE and Skills Across the Four Countries of the UK' (Hodgson et al. 2018).

In each year of the research 45-minute, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the same principals and chairs of governors of four general FE colleges and four SFCs (24 in total and the local authority chairs of the four sub-regional ABR committees (12 in

total); together with representatives from the Greater London Authority (GLA) (3 interviews in total), the national Joint Area Review Delivery Unit (1 interview only in the first year) and London Councils (2 interviews in the second and third years). This longitudinal approach was taken to assess whether and how views changed before, during and after the ABR process. All interviews were carried out by one researcher, except in the case of the sub-regional chairs, where two researchers were sometimes deployed because of the significance of these interviews. The fieldwork started in April 2016 when the ABR process was already underway; was repeated in the Spring of 2017 when the formal ABR process had been completed and again in Spring 2018 when the focus was around the aftermath and implementation. Notes were made at each of these interviews and were shared with interviewees to ensure accuracy. In all cases participants were assured of anonymity, although this was more difficult with the regional chairs because of their unique role. Interviewees were also given the opportunity to comment on or amend the reports that resulted from these first three strands of the research project prior to publication. The consultation seminars and conferences ensured that a wider range of college governors, senior and middle managers, local and regional authority representatives and employers were able to share their views, comment on and contribute to the findings in each of the three years of the research.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical approach underpinning this research is historical and system-based. The theoretical framework illustrated in Figure 2, uses two fundamental dimensions - market/public (economic) and centralised/devolved (political). These dimensions are

represented by two intersecting axes (adapted from Newman 2001: 97; Pullen and Clifton 2016: 17). The market/public axis is an economic continuum that has been shifting over the past three decades; in this case to a more marketised and less public economic life (Keep 2016). The centralised/devolved axis, on the other hand, is a political continuum that represents tension between top-down managerialism and more devolved forms of power within the modern expanded state.

Figure 2 about here

These dimensions are used in order to track the historical development of English FE – a part of the education system that has been both highly marketised and heavily centrally steered over the past 25 years - in order to situate the ABR phase in historical system terms. The diagram also makes it possible to situate the FE systems of the other countries of the UK in 2018. In historical terms, the application of this framework suggests five phases of FE in England since the Further and Higher Education Act and Incorporation in 1992.

- Phase 1 (1993-2000) *Early FE Incorporation - centralised/market approach 1*.- the early Incorporation phase that saw heavy steering by the national Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) together with an emphasis on individual college autonomy and competition to reduce costs.
- Phase 2 (2000-2004) *FE and LSC 1 - 'planned' arms-length government approach* - which relied heavily on quasi-autonomous, non-governmental organisations (quangos), such as the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), to carry out central

government policy, effectively reducing the autonomy and competitiveness of FE colleges.

- Phase 3 (2004-2010) *FE and LSC 2 - co-ordinated/contestability approach* - while still centralized, this phase of the LSC favoured more ‘contestability’ between FE providers and marked the return of a mild marketisation, together with capital investment in colleges.
- Phase 4 (2010-2015) *Coalition Government - centralised/market approach 2*. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition era was characterized by the ‘bonfire of the quangos’, including the LSC, and increasing support for new competitive post-16 providers. This period was also marked by central steering via the national inspectorate -Ofsted - and an imposed austerity that eventually created a funding crisis in the FE college sector requiring rationalization – hence the need for ABRs.
- Phase 5 (2016-2018) *ABR review - limited devolution* - during the Conservative Administration (2015-) English ABRs were introduced alongside preparation for the devolution of the adult education budget in Mayoral Combined Authorities and the GLA (Mayor of London, 2018); the strengthening and rationalization of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) (HMG 2018); and plans for the introduction of Local Industrial Strategies and Local Agreements (HMG 2017); thus signalling the potential for greater collaboration between FE and skills providers and a more co-ordinated local and regional approach.
- Phase 6. (2018 onwards) – *ABR aftermath* - with devolution policies being implemented (i.e. devolved Adult Education Budget) and more proactive co-ordination at the local level combined and regional authorities.

The analysis illustrated in Figure 2 also suggests that the ABR process represents a shift in the character of English FE away from a strong marketisation approach. However, compared to the other countries of the UK (which could be grouped within the top right quadrant), it is not yet a discernably coherent, planned and collaborative FE system.

Research findings – London’s context and the views of stakeholders

The reporting of findings from the research is organized in two parts. The first comprises a brief overview of the ABR process in London. In the second more substantive section the views of the different stakeholders - the leaderships of general FE and sixth form colleges (SFCs) and those at the sub-regional and regional levels - are narrated through eight themes arising both from the interviews and feedback seminars and discussions.

London’s ABR process – a proactive beginning

A distinguishing feature of the London ABR was that, in anticipation of things to come, just over half of the colleges were involved in discussions about alliances, mergers and federations prior to the start of the ABR process itself. Because of its size and the number of institutions involved, London structured its ABR process around four sub-regional reviews – West, Central, East and South. The reviews of the first two began in February, with East and South starting in May 2016 following the Mayoral Election.

Each of the review groups published its ABR report in February 2017 (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/post-16-education-and-training-area-reviews>). These reports contained background information on the respective London

sub-region –its demographics and the economy, patterns of employment, sub-regional priorities and the quality and quantity of current provision and providers. They then proceeded to articulate the case for change and suggested recommendations concerning FE college mergers/alliances; the academisation of SFCs and the function of stand-alone institutions. The organizational recommendations appeared, in some cases, simply to support merger discussions by colleges prior to the ABR process, although there were hotly contested recommendations, notably in the South and West.

London’s FE organizational landscape changed but only partially

Merger activity (April 2018) is summarized in Figure 3, showing that 20 London FE colleges had at that point merged into eight colleges groups, with the prospect of the formation of several more. The picture in the short- to medium-term suggests that the FE landscape in London will be dominated by about 12 college groups with a small number of standalone colleges. In addition, so far all but one SFC remains outside these new FE formations and the plethora of school sixth forms remains unaffected by the ABR process.

“The language of the ABR was not SFC language and, as such, didn’t draw in SFCs. SFCs were frustrated that small sixth forms continued to be set up regardless of the ABR.” (SFC Principal, Yr 3)

From this perspective, ABRs have not yet led to a coherent post-16 London system in any recognized sense, in part because of the ABR focus on skills, which precluded rationalization of the academic provision of schools and colleges, particularly SFCs.

Moreover, there is a question as to whether these new FE college groupings will make a significant difference to vocational provision, progression routes for learners and college/employer relationships in the future. Large and dispersed organisations are difficult to operate and quality assure throughout their many layers; they are at risk of losing their local identity and can incur high transactions costs in the change process that adversely impact on teaching and the learner experience. It takes time for newly-merged organizations to settle down, which suggests that some losses may be incurred before any benefits can be reaped. Moreover, internal reorganization may deflect attention from the focus on developing inclusion-oriented provision for localities and communities and more specialist vocational provision across a sub-region or region. One FE college principal, echoing the comments of other interviewees, summed it up thus:

“The whole thing is still largely about preserving institutions rather than bringing coherence to the education and skills system in London. There has been no system of this sort since the breakup of ILEA and the ABRs did nothing to change this position. The marketization of education has continued apace, whilst simultaneously funding levels have dropped. Unfortunately, in London, this has meant a narrowing of curriculum and a race to the bottom. London has very low level provision clustered in the same areas rather than a genuine specialist hub-and-spoke model.” (FE Principal, Yr 3)

Figure 3 about here

The evolution of discussions 2016-2018

In important respects, stakeholder views of London's ABRs and its tasks were formed early on in the ABR process –the need for some kind of review of FE in the capital but the limitations of its scope in terms of the whole institutional landscape; and the observation that the initial emphasis of the review process was very financially focused, together with a recognition of the need for a more developed technical and vocational education system in the capital. By 2017, in which the formal ABR process was drawing to a close, these themes persisted but were joined by others. These included: criticisms of the ways in which the ABR meetings had unfolded; the focus on finance and college merger and the relative neglect of issues of vocational specialization and employer relationships; and issues concerned with the formation of larger college groups and whether they would be able to address local learner need. The third year of research in 2018 focused on the immediate aftermath of the ABR meetings including: reflections on what the ABR process as a whole had achieved; issues facing the four Sub-regional Employment and Skills Boards (SEBs); and the extent to which stakeholders thought that the ABRs in London had been impacted by government reforms in technical education.

Support for the idea of ABRs in London, but differing expectations

At the beginning of the ABR process in 2016, all participants in the research broadly supported the 'idea' of ABRs.

“The College clearly recognises the need for significant change in the FE system.” (FE College Chair of Governors, Yr 1)

“I welcome the idea of reviewing post-16 education – there is a need for a more strategic and coherent plan.” (SFC Principal, Yr 1)

“ABRs are Important and valuable and pose the right kind of challenges.” (Chair, Sub-Regional Committee, Yr 1)

Their reasoning was based on the grounds that a focus of policy on FE colleges would strengthen their national profile; that the financial challenges of austerity required some kind of organizational response; and that there were merits in developing more effective specialist vocational provision and closer relationships with employers.

However, all parties, particularly college leaders and chairs of the sub-regional committees, who were all local authority leaders, had concerns about whether the ABR process had the capacity to realise these aspirations.

Amidst these general agreements there were differing emphases. Colleges, unsurprisingly, were focused primarily on financial viability and strengthening their role in an education market. SFCs were concerned to ensure their unique place in the system as providers of general education for 16-19 year-olds and to argue for rationalization of general education provision. Those involved in regional and local government, closely associated with employers and communities, wanted to see greater emphasis on how the ABRs might lead to a more coherent and transparent vocational education and training

system with learner progression and FE/employer collaboration and engagement at its heart.

College financial viability and merger won out over skills, progression and the local economy

The most immediate issue for the ABRs was improving the financial health of FE colleges through mergers. It was hoped that creating larger FE groupings would reduce backroom costs, improve the business model of colleges and bring them closer to employers. These aims dominated the agendas of the official ABR meetings. However, the focus on institutional financial viability eroded the initial positive consensus because the colleges involved found themselves in very different situations depending on their financial health, Ofsted inspection grade, position within the education and training market and relationship with surrounding providers. Some were simply not prepared, as one FE principal (Yr 2) put it: “to discuss their dirty linen in public”. Despite the proactive approach of many colleges in the capital to initiate merger discussions, the ABR meetings failed to resolve any of the difficult organisational issues and instead increasingly maintained a status quo.

At the same time, there was an overwhelming view that issues of learner progression, the development of the curriculum, specialization and employer relations had hardly been addressed in the finance-dominated ABR process thus far. These critical economic, productivity-related discussions would be left to be post-ABR deliberations.

Reflecting back on the ABR process in Year 2, one Sub-Regional Chair commented:

“There has been far too much concentration on financial issues rather than creating a system fit for learners and the local economy.” While a representative from the GLA bemoaned the fact that “specialisation was left hanging in the air” (Yr 2).

Colleges were seen as too competitive and not sufficiently engaged with the local economy

Local government representatives provided a particular view about FE college behaviours. While they appreciated the opportunity that ABRs brought for a new dialogue with colleges, there were also criticisms that FE institutions were not always meeting the needs of residents and local businesses - they were too competitive when they should be more collaborative, were relatively knowledgeable about each other from a competitive perspective, but less knowledgeable about and engaged with the local economy, employers and, in some cases, the local community. FE colleges in London were seen by local and regional officials as having a relatively weak relationship to the regional economy compared with other parts of the country because they had responded too easily to a vibrant, full-time student market (aided by FE funding mechanisms), to grow and to reduce unit costs (the ‘Incorporation’ logic). One local authority actor admitted that he had under-estimated FE college autonomy:

“There’s a gap in the type of FE provision that is offered and what employers want, so the ABR in my view was about how we make sure that the FE colleges have the right curriculum for business. However, before I started this work I had

not understood how independent colleges are. I underestimated the self-interest that they would show.” (Chair, Sub-Regional Committee, Yr 2)

As a consequence, local authority officials commented on the highly variable state of their relationships with colleges - some were seen as very close, but others virtually non-existent and even hostile. Issues of college autonomy also resulted in mergers not going to plan, with college leaders and their governors (or a sub-committee of them) in a number of colleges deciding to disregard the recommendations of the ABR reports.

ABRs were not an area review in the full sense

Moreover, and echoing perceptions of ABRs in other parts of the country, interviews with SFC leaders in particular provided insights on the partial nature of the ABR process, due to its vocational focus, whereas most SFCs are overwhelmingly oriented towards general education. SFC leaders argued strongly for 11-18 school involvement and a review of general education provision not just vocational.

“I am not sure that we are being put in the same room with the right partners to make coherence... I am disappointed that the ABR is ineffective at getting a grip in relation to school sixth forms. What is concerning is that it is not possible to inject discussions about broad 16-18 provision.” (SFC Principal, Yr 1)

This would have required a longer and more comprehensive ABR process and a broadening of curriculum focus that was not present in the initial remit.

ABRs became a ‘dog that did not bark’

However, as the ABR deliberations progressed college leaders became increasingly critical of the process – review meetings were seen as slow and cumbersome with the prospects of producing little of value, being either too top-down or chaotic and lacking the power to make decisions stick. One college chair of governors had become thoroughly disillusioned:

“The ABR lacked the muscle to make key decisions and make them stick. What it could do was to get behind the voluntary decisions that had already been made and then claim them as decisions made as part of the ABR.” (FE Principal, Yr 2)

A college leader went as far as to state that the ABR “was the dog that did not bark” (Yr 3) while another FE principal went further still:

“The outcome has been confusion, lack of clarity and distressed working partnerships. Where partnerships were already dysfunctional the ABR process has exacerbated those divisions.” (FE College Principal, Yr 3)

The growing criticism was not only the result of what was perceived to be the excessive focus on economic viability issues, but also the assertion that the personal interests and the ‘management personalities’ of college leaders had prevailed, resulting in the falling

apart of several potential merger processes when individual institutions went against the decision of the ABR process and even that of the FE commissioner. In response to these events, participants in some of the feedback seminars reflected on the fact that there was not an entity in London that would have had the authority to create a plan for mergers across the Capital. As a consequence, by the end of the ABR formal meetings there was also the view that far from ‘job done’, the ABRs would have to be a much longer process, particularly if they were to address the relatively neglected issues of the curriculum and the organisation of specialist vocational provision across London.

Nevertheless, ABRs produced a more collaborative environment

At the same time, however, there was also a widespread view that ABRs had brought people together – notably colleges and local authorities – to produce a more collaborative environment. Some college leaders recognized that it had been good to bring local authorities to the table to address skills issues together. As one FE principal remarked:

“Local authorities are not a threat, they have no resource to take over FE. There is a need for colleges to work in social partnerships to build the skills required to meet the needs for jobs, apprentices and TVET in general.” (Yr 2)

An SFC chair of governors pointed to the role of ABRs in helping colleges look outward:

“The process has brought people together, chairs and principals from the sub-regions in particular, and this has helped them to look beyond the boundaries of

the institution and consider wider regional needs. It has forged new relationships.” (Yr 2)

Increased college size complicates collaboration

While it is possible to argue that the larger college groupings that arose from merger would simply produce more capable competitive units, the evidence on the ground suggested a more complicated collaborative landscape.

When talking about collaboration some college leaders were referring to ‘internal’ collaboration noting, for example, that the increased scale of colleges meant the need for a greater recognition of the different cultures, specialisms and community relations of each of the college sites. As a consequence, larger colleges might place less emphasis on a single, common college culture and might see the role of the contemporary college as promoting varying relevant local and employment cultures at different sites. Participants in feedback seminars argued that it was important to retain local provision for lower level learners, those with special education needs and the adult population in surrounding communities. They also pointed to the growing role of Local Authority Section 106 Planning Agreements that required a proportion of the workforce for local authority contracts to be drawn from the local area and the fact that employers’ Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) concerns often limited their interests to a particular geographical location.

At the same time, a view was expressed that external collaboration between college groups and wider social partners could also become more complex. Colleges with increasing scale would be forced to alter their general and specialist ‘footprints’, so they might simultaneously be local, sub-regional and regional, thus finding it challenging to navigate the new local government terrains. Some are very closely tied to a particular local authority, while others perceive difficulties concerning the lack of symmetry between the college, which is spread over a large area, and local authorities that are concerned with local services for their citizens and support for their local businesses.

“One contradiction is that small organisations can be more flexible and agile but may be more expensive which leads to the logic of mergers and larger, cheaper colleges but they are not necessarily meeting need. Meeting local needs and the needs of the vulnerable and ‘second chancers’ can be lost.” (SFC Principal, Yr 3)

The issue of regional/sub-regional leadership and skills co-ordination

Arguably, for the first time since Incorporation, ABRs in London brought colleges and local authorities into a strategic dialogue. Local civic leaders chaired the four sub-regional meetings and the ABRs were seen as a valuable and unique opportunity to look at colleges and post-16 provision and how to match these to employer and skills needs as well as to the demands of young people. Colleges were also viewed as well-placed to support the development of skills, communities and local economies and to respond to local authority priorities about improving the life-chances of young people. Therefore, ABRs brought colleges into the line of sight of local authorities, whose education agenda had previously been dominated by their local schools. One Chair of a Sub-Regional

Committee stated: “We now see the importance of FE colleges and know they have the answer to the skills agenda.” (Yr 2)

However, amongst college leaders there were differing views about the role of local authorities and regional government, compounded by geographical and spatial variability. Some wanted to see a more equal relationship between colleges and local authorities, while others embraced the idea of regional or sub-regional skills leadership with one interviewee going as far as to state that rationalisation had not gone far enough and the number of colleges should be reduced to five groupings - one in the centre and one in each of the quadrants - accountable to the Mayor and the regional skills agenda. In this regard, comparisons were made with other countries of the UK, Scotland in particular, when commenting that London thus far had no clear regional rationalisation strategy.

Nevertheless, there was greater consensus between college leaders and local and regional government as to the need for a greater focus going forward on developing a more holistic understanding of the structural factors affecting the economy, people’s lives and post-16 provision in the Capital. Accordingly, there was a view that the ABR process should be extended to involve the views and priorities of the new Mayor and an expectation that the legacy of the ABRs would last significantly beyond the end of the official process.

“What is needed is another look at London as a whole. The sub-regional arrangements of the ABR are only of limited value. Events have passed them by.” (FE Principal, Yr 3)

By the third year of research, the post-ABR period and the formation of the four Sub-regional Skills and Employment Boards brought a sense of enhanced *'joined-up thinking'*, with participants coming to a greater level of agreement on what was to be done to create more choice and flexibility of provision and also a greater understanding of the skills needs of the sub-regions. The new Sub-Regional Skills and Employment Boards were seen as key to working out a relationship with the Mayor's London Skills Strategy.

Discussion – two logics of reform and the future of English FE

Logic A and Logic B

It was clear that from the beginning of the ABR process in London there were two distinct but related perspectives about the role of these FE college reviews. The first focused on college economic viability and the process of merger. The second concerned skills development, progression pathways, specialist provision and relations with employers. These we termed Logic A and Logic B.

Logic A could be characterised as an 'adaptive institutional and competitive approach', with a central focus on FE institutional economic viability to preserve a competitive spirit in the FE sector, albeit with larger and more federated players. Viewed from a UK-wide perspective, this represents a particularly 'English' solution to the role of FE compared with the more centrally 'planned' developments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Logic B, on the other hand, denotes a ‘system-wide and collaborative approach’ that involves the full range of FE and skills providers, employers and local and regional authorities in a more co-ordinated approach to skills development because they have a stake in improving provision, vocational specialisation and inclusive progression pathways. Logic B could be seen to represent a shift from the Incorporation competitive logic towards a more locally collaborative system approach, thus bringing English FE closer to its position in the other three countries of the UK.

Logic A was dominant during the official ABR process

The evidence collected over a period of three years suggests that Logic A – a focus on financial viability, mediated by the respective economic profiles of the participating colleges - was dominant during the official ABR process. Added to this was the partial nature of the ABR – both in terms of its restrictive focus on FE colleges and skills provision and its limited ability to discuss vocational specialisation and partnership relations with employers. Logic A thus did little to interrupt the historical power of FE Incorporation and English FE’s marketized history. Its dominance also offers an explanation as to why the ABR process disappointed so many participants, not only representatives of local and regional government, but also college leaders who had hoped that ABRs would contribute to a better FE system in the capital.

Logic B – subordinate during the ABRs but growing in the aftermath

Our research also suggested that Logic B – the focus on building specialist vocational provision and clear learner progression routes together with securing improved relations with employers - was the main reason for the broad consensus of different stakeholders

behind the idea of ABRs at the beginning of the exercise. However, these aims were overshadowed by Logic A within the short timescales provided by the ABR meetings, with little time to discuss the longer-term issues that required the building of collaborative relationships.

While it was clear that Logic A had displaced Logic B, it could also be argued that these two Logics should not be viewed as mutually exclusive and that, in theory at least, more viable, area-based FE college formations could assist in the development of specialist vocational provision and more effective relationships with employers. However, in the relative absence of a pan-London framework (the Mayor's Skills Strategy (GLA 2018a) was still emerging at the time of the research), the mergers that did take place appeared to be based less on considerations of the needs of the local economy and more on the basis of financial viability, together with parochial factors including the personal preferences of college leaderships.

Logic B depends on the new sub-regional and regional structures

Nevertheless, the spirit of Logic B was an aspiration supported by many and regarded as 'unfinished business'. This highlights the importance of the role of the new sub-regional Skills and Employment Boards (SEBs) that came into being after the official ABR process had concluded and the Mayor's Skills Strategy in promoting the post-ABR collaborative skills, progression and employment agenda. SEBs, comprising representatives from local and regional government, the employer community, higher

education and FE providers, have been formed in the post-ABR period to take forward the skills agenda at the sub-regional level in London.

As with the formal ABR meetings, collaboration and inclusion have to be balanced with manageability and, therefore, individual FE colleges or college groupings do not have their own seats at the table – they have a single representative for the sub-region. The same applies to employers. So, a key question will be how the SEBs will encourage colleges to fulfil their area-based role. This will depend not only on making colleges feel valued, but also on the strength of the new regional and sub-regional fora and strategies. Each of the SEBs is developing a sub-regional skills plan (e.g. South London Partnership 2018), but these organisations do not have specific powers over colleges to enforce particular behaviours, even though they may be able to exert moral and peer pressure. Moreover, this collaborative effort is taking place against a background of continuing competition between different types of institutions – that is the new college groupings, the remaining stand-alone colleges, schools, and independent training providers competing over sub-degree provision and colleges and HEIs competing over higher-level provision).

Although ABRs were not guided by a pan-London plan, the London policy landscape is rapidly changing through the role of London’s Mayor’s Skills Strategy (GLA 2018a) and the Skills for Londoners Task Force (for more detail see <https://www.london.gov.uk/moderngovmb/ieListMeetings.aspx?CommitteeId=435>).

There is also the potential shaping influence of the £400 millions of devolved funding

from the Adult Education Budget (AEB) and the Mayor's Construction Academy (GLA 2018b). There was an emerging view in the research that these Pan-London strategies would become more influential over time, shaping not only the agendas of the SEBs, but also the approaches of colleges that seek to access regionally-held funding. This is likely also to be the case with the newly emerging devolved powers across England.

The new college groups – how far will they make a difference?

One of the assumptions of ABRs is that 'bigger is better'; larger colleges with a greater range of curriculum specialisms and a more stable financial base can better serve communities and local economies. However, the research unearthed concerns about whether larger and more geographically dispersed colleges formations would remain committed to particular local communities and to providing progression ladders for learners from lower to higher skills levels. The fear was that the new college formations would not do enough to offset current government policy on technical education and apprenticeships that is primarily targeted at the higher levels (DBIS/DfE 2016) and that they would inadvertently leave local populations behind. A key question, therefore, is how quickly the new college groups will cohere as more diverse entities and how they will work with other social partners in order to meet both their social inclusion and vocational specialist roles within and across localities, sub-regions and London as a whole.

What is clear from the research so far is that new college groups will not on their own be able to transform London's skills provision. They will have to work with the new sub-

regional SEBs within the framework of the Mayor's pan-London Skills Strategy. This will require new types of institutional thinking and leadership capacities in FE that focus on managing more dispersed and polycentric organizations. College leadership will need to think strategically about different levels of skills and social needs associated with local populations of all ages, thus preserving and developing local identities, but at the same time also opening up mobility through progression to higher level skills and specialized vocational provision. Deep collaboration and engagement in relationship-building with local authorities, higher education institutions and leading employers will be required to reach long-term strategic agreements. Some FE leaders would maintain that they already think and act in this way. On the other hand, the institutional dramas that surfaced in the London ABR process would suggest that there is still some way to go in this regard and certainly there does not yet appear to be a universal effort to build a coherent London-wide FE and skills system.

Hybridized post-market settlements in English further education

From a national perspective by reflecting both on the empirical research on London and the background literature on England and the other countries of the UK, the research enabled us to ask the question, 'How far do the ABRs signal a move from a marketised FE sector to a more collaborative FE system? By the 'marketised FE sector' we are referring to FE colleges, including SFCs, being defined by a highly marketised philosophy emanating from their incorporated status, having a distinctive role compared with other institutions, such as school sixth forms and universities, while also being heavily steered by a set of national policy, funding and accountability levers.

The concept of an ‘FE system’, on the other hand, suggests a set of local, sub-regional and regional collaborative relationships in which FE colleges make a distinctive contribution to a holistic local learning and skills system, particularly in relation to technical and vocational education, by supporting progression pathways from lower to higher levels of knowledge and skill and responding increasingly to a policy and funding framework organized at the sub-regional and regional levels. The idea of a discrete national sector, comprising a range of individual, competing incorporated institutions, thus gives way to a more integrated and coherent pattern of local and sub-regional relationships (Hodgson and Spours 2015).

According to this system logic that sees FE colleges as an integral part of a more democratically accountable economic and political landscape, ABRs have not yet delivered the goods, despite stimulating some closer relations between colleges and some local authorities. Moreover, if we reference back to Figure 2 and the comparison with FE organization in the other countries of the UK, the move from sector to system by the end of the English ABR process would appear modest. The fact remains that FE colleges in England are not yet bound by specific national and regional skills policies in the same way as other countries of the UK, for example, Scotland with its regional outcome agreements (see Hodgson et al. 2018).

The evidence collected so far in the ABR process suggests, therefore, a ‘hybridized’ moment and a form of transition between a marketised sector and a more public, devolved and collaborative system. Accordingly, Doel (2018) sees new combinations

between competition and collaboration emerging rather than one replacing the other. Given this scenario, colleges may engage in types of partnership working that are full of tensions and contradictions and that might be characterized as ‘weakly collaborative’ (Hodgson and Spours 2006).

Since the conclusion of the formal ABR process, however, there has been a growing influence of sub-regional and regional skills bodies and strategies in some areas of England, backed up by financial incentives. The tipping factor in terms of outcomes, therefore, may not simply be college effectiveness and its leadership, important though these are, but the effects of the ‘system environment’ on all the constituent organisations. Research from the OECD (Ross and Brown 2013) suggests that it is the system environment - the relationships between institutions and wider social partners working in a dynamic and collaborative way in what we have referred to elsewhere as a ‘social ecosystems’ (Hodgson and Spours 2018) - that may prove critical to innovation and growth. It is through these local systems that wider opportunities for involvement in skills development and increased investment may lie, particularly in those areas where urban regeneration and infrastructural development is backed by public and private investment.

Nevertheless, it would be unwise to over-estimate the powers of ‘horizontal’ governance at the local and regional levels in the absence of helpful ‘vertically inspired frameworks’ coming from national government and national agencies. Keep (2016) reminds us that the powers devolved to local government are at best partial. While ABRs may mark an

important step on the journey beyond FE marketisation, our own historical reflections and the experience of systems in other parts of the UK suggest that we may only be at the very first stages of a post-Incorporation model for FE in England.

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