



General/Liberal Studies in English Further Education

The rise and fall of a radical
programme to balance general
and technical education,
c1957–1980

Dr Josh Patel
Edge Foundation

April 2024



The world is changing fast and education needs to keep up. Edge is an independent, politically impartial education foundation. We want education to be relevant to the twenty-first century. We gather evidence through research and real world projects and partnerships and use this to lead the debate and influence policy and practice.

Edge believes all young people need to be equipped with the skills that today's global, digital economy demands, through a broad and balanced curriculum, high quality training, engaging real world learning and rich relationships between education and employers.

Visit www.edge.co.uk to find out more.

Contents

Introduction	4
Rise and decline	5
Evaluation	8
Learning from the past – conclusions	10
Bibliography	12

Acknowledgements

Thank you very much to Ann-Marie Bathmaker, Dana Dabbous, Kat Emms, Prue Huddleston, Andrea Laczik, Kevin Orr, Robin Simmons, and Lorna Unwin for their helpful conversations, thoughts, and advice.

Introduction

General/Liberal Studies (GLS) was a 'curricular and pedagogical phenomenon' in English technical and Further Education (FE) colleges from the mid-1950s to the late-1970s (Bailey & Unwin, 2008), though some accounts identify its final end in the 1990s.¹ It aimed to enhance the learning of students aged 16-19 attending courses in FE colleges, especially new demographic groups of students perceived as unready to enter the labour market, by providing an element of 'liberal studies' supplementarily to the rest of their curriculum. The content and delivery of GLS was never codified, evolved over time, and differed even between individual tutors, who exercised a high degree of autonomy. However, it wielded a strong educational mission: to broaden education of young people in FE and prepare them for their social roles and citizenship as part of their vocational and technical studies.

Commonly, GLS provision included one-hour per week (Bailey, 2018) covering topics including but not limited to English, modern foreign languages, history, sociology, politics, and media studies. These studies were integrated to varying degrees into the wider curriculum. The educational ends of GLS were similarly ill-defined. It generally aimed to cultivate critical thinking and communication skills, an awareness of social and political factors and their consequences for citizens' rights and responsibilities, assist the transition into adulthood, and expose students to culture (Perry, 2017). Initially, GLS was rarely assessed. The scale of provision of GLS in FE colleges is difficult to determine, but likely many thousands of teachers and millions of students 'took part, willingly or otherwise, in this radical experiment' ("Editorial", 2018).

A small body of literature by FE researchers on GLS has emerged over the past decade. Many of these researchers were themselves involved in the delivery of GLS and draw on these experiences as well as interviews with GLS teachers and students (Perry, 2017; Simmons, 2019, 2020). Based on this literature, this curriculum review describes the rise and fall of this striking educational agenda. It outlines how GLS, with its discourse-based pedagogy, social-mindedness, and high degree of tutor autonomy, epitomises principles that remain relevant and important. But tensions between that autonomy and the need for accountability led to its demise and blanching much of its distinctive educational characteristics. This story encapsulates many of the factors shaping the salient features of the FE system today. The essence of GLS endures in warped forms, such as in Functional Skills and enrichment.

¹ GLS had many names, including 'Social Studies', 'English', 'general studies', 'liberal studies', and from around the mid-late 1970s 'Social and Life skills', 'general and communication studies' and 'communication studies', as well as 'complementary studies' or 'contrasting studies'. This review covers the range of institutions providing vocational education and training over the course of the twentieth century currently known as General FE Colleges in England, following Huddleston and Unwin (2024).

Rise and decline

The historical impetus for GLS derives from a series of overlapping anxieties about public moral health, and national economic and geopolitical decline. Industrialisation from the mid-nineteenth century compelled greater numbers of people from across the social spectrum to train to meet demands for skilled labour. Expanding education was however perceived by social elites with some suspicion as enabling working-class activism and was later associated with the spread of communism and fascism (Bourke, 2022; Simmons, 2015). Concerns particularly coalesced around the dangers of 'overspecialisation'. A narrow focus on specific academic or technical knowledge and skills in education and training could lead to 'moral vacuity' (Vernon, 2000) and an inability to responsibly (according to one's social status) wield the increasingly powerful knowledge enabled by modern technologies.² Christian Socialists and the Workers' Educational Association developed programmes of moral education often called Liberal, Social, or English studies, taught primarily through evening classes in local mechanics institutions and aimed primarily at the working classes (Simmons et al., 2014). Such programmes have been identified both as emancipatory and instruments of social control (Pellegrino-Bailey & Unwin, 2008; Simmons, 2020; Sutcliffe, 2014).

The experience of the Second World War intensified the situation. The landmark 1944 Education Act, as part of its wide-ranging agenda for the reform of education, required local authorities to make provision for post-compulsory FE to meet the perceived national need for technologically qualified 'manpower' (in the gendered language of the time). The FE sector expanded from 42,763 students in 1939 to 300,000 by 1953, and FE shifted away from elective evening courses attended by a 'privileged section of the working class' (Simmons, 2019). Increased numbers of craft apprentices and day-release students, compelled to attend in conditions of employment, often hailed from demographics hitherto excluded from post-compulsory education (Simmons

et al., 2014). These groups were perceived to be less enterprising, less academically able, and less ready to participate in society. From the 1950s these concerns coalesced into a campaign for the 'liberalisation' of FE despite (indeed, because of) intense pressures on time and space in the curriculum (Huddleston & Unwin, 2024). Following recognition of its importance in a 1956 White Paper, the Ministry of Education Circular 323 *Liberal Education in Technical Colleges* (1957) proposed that liberalisation of the curriculum might be achieved by including additional subjects, contextualising technical subjects, and more personal teaching methods (Bailey, 2018). This stipulation was followed by examining and awarding bodies such as City and Guilds London Institute and the National Council for Technological Awards. Characteristic of governance of FE colleges at the time, the mode of delivery and the proportion of studies that should be dedicated to GLS was left to colleges and teachers to determine.

The aims of GLS during the 1950s were associated with the importance of the education of the 'whole man' (again, gendered male). GLS, as a separate period of study deliberately contraposed to vocational studies, was to include consideration of topics including:

- (i) the young worker in the adult world;*
- (ii) the development of moral values;*
- (iii) the 'bridge' between school and working life; and*
- (iv) the continuation of their general education* (Bailey & Unwin, 2008, p. 65; MoE, 1959).

This agenda was unavoidably linked to persistent paternalistic anxieties concerning the new strata of the population entering FE in the 1950s and their unreadiness to participate in society. New patterns of supposedly irresponsible consumption by young people with significant disposable income were especially worrying. As one tutor in 1955 contended:

² Throughout this review I avoid using 'academic' except in instances such as here to refer to the idea of an education in single body of disciplinary knowledge purely studied for its own sake and without any mind towards practical applications. It is dubious whether such an idea of an education has any current or historical reality. By contrast I use 'general' to refer to learning which while may lack proximity or applicability to immediate needs of the learner's life and needs nonetheless may be important to their actualisation in their vocation and as a member of society (see Edge Foundation, 2023).

The young miner at the training centre can and is taught to be an efficient miner. But he is likely to remain stupidly underdeveloped as a citizen, he will have no standards of value, as far as beauty is concerned, and will develop and sustain his appetite for crime comics, worthless films, commercial dance music, sordid back alley pleasures, because he is unaware of anything better (Halliwell, 1955 cited in Stafford, 2017, p. 15).

Their proposed solution was to experiment with encouraging mining apprentices to write poetry. Inoculating students with high artistic culture in contrast to their vocational learning was intended to exert a civilising influence. This 'moral rescue mission' (Simmons, 2015) however could be animated by a concern to invite and arm individuals to participate in democratic discourse. This included enfranchising students in discussions around the social ends they served through developing and wielding practical skills, as well as impressing on them that their specialisms only provided a 'partial statement about truth and reality' and stressing the importance of collaboration (Waugh, 2017, p. 6).

Further white papers and reports in the early 1960s reinforced the importance of liberal studies in an expanding FE system, broadly supported by teachers' associations, the Trades Union Congress, industry, the new Association of Liberal Education (ALE, 1961), and evangelised through conferences, staff development, and teacher training (Bailey & Unwin, 2008; Perry, 2017). GLS changed alongside this expansion. A new generation of tutors, often the first of their family to attend university and hailing from working class backgrounds, took on responsibility for GLS (Simmons et al., 2014). This diverse group rejected the mission of GLS to unquestioningly transmit virtues of the established social elite. They instead were concerned with the democratisation of critical faculties needed to evaluate and participate in civil society (Hilliard, 2012; Patel, 2021). With this impetus the aims of GLS shifted away from an inoculation model and towards engagement with texts and experiences sometimes familiar to students but which had not previously been validated in formal education (Stafford, 2017). Content ranged across high culture and popular culture and might include, for example, 'sex, drugs, and rock and roll', current affairs, money matters, personal issues, local context of their industry, but also 'industrial relations and strikes, or the rights of young workers' (Bailey & Unwin, 2008, p. 65). This new ambition shared some of the paternalistic tensions of the older vein of

GLS. Raising the political consciousness of students often implied the working class did not already have a political consciousness. But through a curriculum based around encounter with an inclusive open spectrum of ideas embedded in social and political contexts and artistic mediums, GLS came to aim to foster the capacity to students to articulate and justify their ideas, give and receive criticism, empathise with others, and to problematise commonsense ideas as they transitioned to adulthood (Simmons, 2018).

While there was an overarching discourse about the moral principles under which liberalising FE was pursued, the details of how this featured into the day-to-day teaching, learning, and assessment was not always clear (Perry, 2017). Exam boards made no stipulation for its delivery other than that it had to be present. Assessment elements were absent and in fact opposed as uncondusive to the sort of individualised learning pursued. There was considerable variety in whether colleges established discrete GLS departments or adjunct to technical and commercial departments; tutors were employed full- or part-time and their duties often included delivering other general qualifications such as A levels.

GLS tended towards a less didactic approach than other vocational studies and encompassed a large number of pedagogic strategies. It was primarily based around exposure to and debate and discussion of a range of ideas. Inside the classroom this might involve art, literature, media, especially films, and foreign languages (Huddleston & Unwin, 2024). Students might be tasked with research or creative project tasks independently or in groups, and inside and outside of formal classroom time. This might include writing poetry, preparing for a debate, or from the late 1970s when equipment became readily available, compiling and filming a news report (Stafford, 2018). These activities often include an element of role-play. In best practice, activities such as role-play were a form of investigation into the mode of operation of a social institution (such as judicial proceedings) and a reflection on one's own position in relation to the institution. Limited time outside the classroom might include visits to theatres or factories. Through these activities students were invited to negotiate with tutors features of the curriculum based on what was of interest and relevance to them. In this more informal space, tutors (who students may have addressed more casually, using tutors' first names) facilitated rather than led learning. Tutors had autonomy to set agendas based on their own materials or graduate specialisms or drew from available resource packs, and in later periods utilised textbooks (Simmons, 2018; Simmons, 2019).

By the 1970s however, the mode of delivery and mission of GLS sustained doubts about its relevance to the broader technical education programme of FE. The economic troubles of the 1970s saw a rapid increase in youth unemployment and a deterioration of apprenticeship numbers and investment in training. British decline was attributed famously by Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan in 1976 to failures of 'progressive', abstract, unfocused teaching to provide a flexible labour force to meet economic needs (Hayward & Fernandez, 2004; Simmons, 2019). The newly established Manpower Services Commission (MSC, 1974-1988) a non-departmental body of the Department of Employment, became a major funder of new training schemes. Colleges' income from the Department of Education and Science proportionately fell as their offer shifted to approved qualifications where places were tied to MSC funding. The composition of colleges' student body also changed. Primarily white day-release students were replaced by a more diverse cohort of MSC-funded full time 'trainees', and later 'prevocational' and 'general vocational' students (Stafford, 2018). Echoing fears earlier in the century, these new students were perceived as having non-academic dispositions and poorer educational attainment. Such a deficit model presumed school-leavers lacked the personal and social skills to obtain and sustain employment but was in reality a consequence of challenging labour market conditions (Bailey and Unwin, 2008). The MSC pursued a new model known as vocational preparation and new vocationalism aiming to address national youth unemployment through the certification of generic skills to prepare young people to enter and move across a variety of occupations (Hayward & Fernandez, 2004). This included programmes such as the Youth Opportunities Programme (1977-1983) and Youth Training Scheme (1983-88) (Maguire, 2022).

In response, agitations within GLS by tutors and others aimed to reform GLS to integrate more closely with the broader VET curriculum. Defences of GLS increasingly deployed MSC rhetoric, arguing that GLS developed 'employability skills', 'personal effectiveness skills' and 'life and social skills'. Reform was also seen as an opportunity to further the pedagogic aims of GLS by realising hitherto unaddressed recommendations from the 1957 Circular to liberalise 'the treatment of subjects and teaching methods' and facilitate the education of the 'whole person' across the entirety of VET (Bailey & Unwin, 2008; Carroll, 1980). Two different approaches to reform GLS were pursued by the new Technical Education Council (TEC) from 1973 and the Business Education Council (BEC) from 1974. TEC sustained a requirement of 15% of

learning time spent on GLS-allied subjects but stipulated learning objectives aligned to work-based capacities. It jettisoned the indeterminate label 'liberal' in favour of the more clearly vocationally aligned 'general and communication studies' and for the first time included assessment. BEC, by contrast, identified core themes which had previously been stand-alone in GLS: people, communication, money, and numeracy. These themes and student-centred pedagogies were to be integrated throughout the curriculum, especially through cross-modular assignments (Bailey & Unwin, 2008; Fisher, 2004).

Consequently, GLS curriculum moved away from disciplinary knowledge of the social sciences and humanities and became more generalised. Practitioners still had some autonomy to experiment with critical and creative pedagogies (Simmons, 2019). This included addressing economics, race, class, gender and relationships of power in the workplace, or students' rights around stop-and-search 'sus laws' as the student body diversified and new social and civil rights were being negotiated (Simmons, 2018).

However, the growing significance of certification and assessment in GLS blanded much of its distinctive educational character. MSC iterations of GLS stipulated that 'socio-economic context should be excluded from taught sessions' (Simmons, 2020, p. 97), and the content of GLS became more prescribed. General and communication studies was incrementally further decontextualised, and splintered into various employability training programmes such as BTEC Common Skills following the planned merger of BEC and TEC in 1982 (Fisher, 2004). These were displaced by the MSC's Core Skills Project which identified 103 core skills to describe and accredit occupational competence (Bailey & Unwin, 2008) and strengthen young people's adaptability and employability. Later revisions such as changes from BTEC National to GNVQ Advanced courses from 1992, and Key Skills to Functional Skills from 2007, further tied generic skills to perceived needs of businesses and industry through examination, inspection, and managerialism, decreasing tutor autonomy (see Hayward & Fernandez, 2004; Simmons et al., 2014). Assessment practices became product and outcome focused, rather than process focused (Bloomer, 2002), in contrast to the distinctive 'free-form culture' of GLS (Simmons, 2015; Stafford, 2017, p. 21). These developments marked the end of a distinctive programme of GLS.

Evaluation

Bailey and Unwin (2008) describe the aims and principles of GLS as 'striking in their ambition' in its commitment to human flourishing and to civic rights and duties. Tutors found ensuring delivery met all its laudable aims was almost an impossible task (Gomoluch & Bailey, 2010). Its internal tensions, an inability to generate persuasive evidence for external accountability, and ongoing social and economic anxieties about national decline led to its dissolution.

GLS in its ascendancy across the 1960s and 1970s was a fascinating experiment in student-centred pedagogies. It was inherently opposed to banking models or rote learning, and championed the virtues of project-based, student-centred, and active learning (Simmons et al., 2014). Student-led discussion and negotiation of the curriculum was a spontaneous, inherently social experience, and produced highly individualised outcomes responsive to student needs (Simmons, 2020). Simmons has argued that GLS was a powerful tool for the transmission of powerful useful knowledge by which students might challenge dominant social norms and act as dynamic and confident agents to intervene in and improve the world around them for themselves and others (Simmons, 2015).

At the same time, the accusation that the mission of GLS was fundamentally paternalistic was a concern featuring prominently in tutor's reflections. Inoculation models of GLS especially prior to 1950 were undoubtedly wound up in beliefs about the 'proper' work and conduct of working-class citizens. Such assumptions persisted. Fisher (2004) identifies a latent meritocratic idealism even as late as the foundation of BEC and TEC, with early chairmen of the organisations primarily interested in the preparation of second-class citizens for their social and economic roles. Concerns for provision of GLS were in every phase of its evolution animated by anxieties that a cohort of new entrants to FE were unsuited to receive the training they were entering or enter the workplace. Tutors recalled walking a fine line between inoculation approaches in bourgeois values and the transmission of useful knowledge. Simmons has argued that the distinctive characteristics of GLS may have been arisen from this tension. The character of politically confident and self-assertive day-release students of GLS in the 1960s made didactic pedagogies impossible and

necessitated dialogic modes of teaching (Simmons, 2015) to validate and even make socially feasible GLS education inside FE college classrooms.

Its lack of explicit aims, the autonomy for tutors that this afforded, and a lack of assessment criteria, meant that the educational experience of GLS probably varied widely even within colleges. Perry's (2017, p. 11) study based on interviews with fifty GLS tutors reported 'almost no recollections of college or departmental policy with stated aims that would drive the development of the curriculum'. In not atypical testimonies, former GLS tutors recalled colleagues used GLS lessons to screen hired films for 'entertainment', 'without any preparation and with no follow up'. As Stafford (2017, pp. 15-17) presenting this evidence further notes, practitioners lacked confidence that student-led approaches were satisfactorily championed. Reflections of collaborative peer dialogues between tutors are not common in the existing literature. Without any formal accountability or clear public statement of justifications for GLS, tutors were exposed to criticisms they wielded an undue political bent in their teaching. Especially common was the charge tutors exercised a 'radical or left-wing bias' particularly in sessions which covered topics such as 'industrial relations and strikes, or the rights of young workers' (Bailey & Unwin, 2008). For many tutors indeed GLS was explicitly a political and emancipatory project of critical pedagogy (Simmons, 2016). Without external quality mediation or set curriculum the meaning of quality was contested. This void of accountability and resistance to prescriptive assessment methods enabled simultaneously meaningful and conscientious student outcomes and a lack of confidence and conviction on the part of students and tutors. Assessment of GLS proved contentious precisely because the outcomes it sought to facilitate were highly individualised and assessment threatened to constrain thinking and creativity. The important individual reflection on such personal outcomes was difficult to debrief, assess, and quantify (Stafford, 2018). A lack of assessment had similarly positive and negative consequences for students. It denied tutors an external tool used to leverage student motivation. Although reliving pressure from students, this placed the onus on tutors to engage students through the quality and relevance of teaching and learning. Suspicions grew readily in the absence

of accountability, suspecting that opposition to GLS assessment was motivated primarily by tutor indolence. This lack of reassurance around GLS meant, as Stafford (2017, p. 21) has identified, many tutors welcomed the 'tedious, but also re-assuring' formalisation of GLS from the 1970s which legitimised and professionalised their practice. Because of this, the transition from GLS to communication studies occurred, as at least one contemporary noted, with little struggle (Carroll, 1980).

The pressure GLS felt to showcase its utility as communication skills is indicative of these anxieties. GLS jarred against the content-heavy, utilitarian vocational curriculum and the dominant 'industrial' regimented culture and discipline of colleges. Even in the 1950s designating GLS a priority within already busy timetables was suspect (Simmons, 2019). Its mission was easy to ridicule as inadequately practical, as it was in Tom Sharpe's satirical novel *Wilt* (Simmons, 2020). The notion of bringing 'culture' to working classes predisposed against it could be dismissed as absurd by the prejudiced, snobbish, or defensive. Unable to muster a convincing apologia, GLS was susceptible to the criticism that it was simply to top up timetables, and of little interest or relevance to tutors or students. From the 1970s, it was also vulnerable to the accusation it was part of a 'banking' strategy to artificially deflate youth unemployment figures by expanding education.

Frustrations with GLS were shared by students and staff in colleges. Even in the 1960s, an ALE survey of 21 colleges identified that GLS was 'regarded with distaste' as an unnecessary add-on to a vocational education that was already 'complete' (Bailey & Unwin, 2008, p. 66). Students recalled giving tutors 'a real hard time' as they lacked the authority of trade lecturers; in some cases trade lecturers shared a disinclination towards their GLS colleagues (Simmons, 2019, p. 68). Misgivings could be mutual. Where GLS tutors taught other non-vocational qualifications, there are reports they favoured their more academically inclined pupils.

Students' memories of GLS included uninterested and unprepared tutors (one former student recalled being permitted to leave and have a snowball fight), poor timetabling and facilities, unengaging topics, and an absence of a shared understanding between FE students and their university-educated tutors particularly regarding the purpose of GLS (Simmons, 2019). Yet, as one tutor recalled, while:

there was massive resistance from the students... sometimes it would take the form of just mucking about or throwing stuff at you but ... the same people who were doing that, you might spend an hour after class standing on the stairs passionately discussing some issue that had arisen in the lesson ('Keith' quoted in Simmons, 2015, p. 94).

GLS could be a positive experience, taught by enthusiastic and accommodating tutors. Interviewees recalled how, for example:

girls in the hairdressing courses did gain a lot from working through some of those communication assignments...they realised they were good at organising things and planning things and that they had other skills than just doing hairdressing ('Karen', quoted in Simmons et al., 2014, p. 38).

It facilitated students' confidence in addressing real-world situations and contributed to their future personal and professional development (Simmons, 2019). Interviewees also recalled GLS staff and trade staff integrating learning effectively (Simmons, 2020).

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, it seems hardly unsurprising that centralised accountability measures were introduced to address the potential for abuse of public funds through GLS. This perspective is however, implicated in a seismic change in government interest in vocational education since 1980s. Stafford (2018) describes this as a form of direct political involvement in curriculum development of 'ideologically-driven government ministers'. Maintaining and monitoring FE in the context of political and democratic accountability for taxpayer spending required data gathering apparatus. Assessment in this regard is less interested in helping students and tutors evaluate their learning process and instead provides centralised policy directors a decontextualised measure of the effects of policy levers and funding allocations.

Learning from the past – conclusions

The original impetus for GLS arose in the very different context of post-war full employment for men. The situation changed radically with the decline of apprenticeships from the late 1960s and the waning of the UK industrial basis. In many ways, today the principles of GLS are more relevant than ever with the shift away from employment for life and conceptual knowledge of an industrial profession towards a curriculum underpinned by more general conceptions of learning to meet changing demands of the labour market (Huddleston & Unwin, 2013; Simmons, 2019). Any lessons learned from GLS would have to be careful to avoid cherry-picking innovative ideas without the underlying structures and attitudes that enabled their success (Laczik et al., 2023). Today's performative political culture and ideologies exercising a considerable degree of surveillance and low trust in education professionals are 'instinctively opposed to the openness and flexibility' of GLS (Stafford, 2018). Nevertheless, the fate of the GLS experiment provides useful guidance for future initiatives in FE policy and pedagogy. This paper reflects on two issues: firstly, the teaching of general skills and their proximity to the workplace, secondly, the relationship between autonomy of lecturers and accountability measures.

General skills

There is general agreement that participation in education or training should facilitate adaptability and flexibility to engage with a labour market driven by rapid technological change and heading in uncertain and unknowable directions (Edge Foundation, 2023). This principle was a core tenet of GLS. Indeed, GLS lecturers wielding a strong, holistic understanding of the 'experience and awareness of the learning needs of young people in the new industrial environment' and the role of FE in delivering this were often consequently well-prepared to move into managerial and research positions around FE (Stafford, 2018). Current ambitions to ensure students study some form of maths and English to age 18 in recent plans by the Conservative government in 2023 with the proposal for a new Advanced British Standard baccalaureate (Department for Education, 2023) continue to draw on some similar assumptions about what constitutes preparedness for adult life.

Paradoxically, perhaps the strongest legacy of GLS derives from the programmes of Key Skills, Core Skills, and Functional Skills that emerged in the years after 1970 as attempts to more clearly evidence their contribution to developing young people's generic faculties and enhance their suitability for entry into the real world of employment. The concern of GLS for the preparedness of learners in their general lives has been taken forward across 14-19 FE but is buried under the 'performativity' of Functional Skills (Bailey, 2018; Simmons, 2019; Simmons et al., 2014, p. 33). It includes, arguably, Prevent and British Values (Janmaat, 2018). Since 2013, and most recently in T levels, programmes for 16-19-year-olds specify the mandatory inclusion of employability, enrichment, and pastoral elements which are evaluated by Ofsted (Huddleston & Unwin, 2024).

General skills accountability has however been criticised as failing to deliver desired results (Hayward & Fernandez, 2004), and the MSC model has been accused of prioritising the immediate skills requirements of employers at the expense of a broader general educational experience (Cockburn, 1987). The study of English and mathematics in FE colleges today through GCSEs or Functional Skills alongside vocational studies excludes the forms of social and cultural learning (Kobayashi et al., 2024) that GLS offered. This decontextualisation 'can be limiting both socially and intellectually' and often acts to disincentivise critical evaluation of the status quo students find themselves in (Simmons, 2015, 2020, p. 93). Despite the emphasis on the utility of skills education, the benefits of other useful elements aligned with GLS have been lost. For example, Prue Huddleston and Lorna Unwin highlight that despite the obvious benefits of the study of particularly foreign languages, there has been a decline in language provision at FE colleges in the UK (Huddleston & Unwin, 2024).

Autonomy and accountability

The capacity to contextualise knowledge meaningfully was enabled by the autonomy afforded to tutors by GLS. It was however simultaneously critically disabling. The struggles of more free-form models of GLS to convince students, the FE sector, and indeed, tutors themselves,

of the relevance and quality of their efforts to the broader technical education programme are indicative of the difficulties such an approach faces.

It is especially easy to attribute the decline of the progressive aims of GLS and its subordination to an economising central authority as a consequence of restrictions on the progressive redistribution of resources. This is, however, to underappreciate the ways in which the priorities of historical agents were aligned with these ends (Ortolano, 2019). GLS tutors and bodies such as ALE from the 1970s sought to preserve and indeed extend the values of GLS by promoting a broad curriculum integrated throughout vocational education and training by establishing new forms of accountability. Doing so secured their own livelihoods, professional status, and legitimacy by tapping into new modes of funding in order to respond to a national crisis afflicting young people (Stafford, 2017). Free-form pedagogies inherently expose vulnerabilities in classroom authorities and require substantial institutional and political reassurances and trust that GLS did not provide.³ The characteristic freedoms of GLS were seen as a necessary casualty to preserve what were deemed to be the most important and relevant of its educational aims.

The introduction of a prescriptive assessment regime based around the certification of specific capacities was particularly smothering for the process-based outcomes GLS could generate. But without systems of accountability, it is difficult to make meaningful statements about why such generic skills should be a priority for public funding. Policymaker and public trust in public sector professionals to make best use of taxpayer funds is low. Austere attitudes to increasing public funding mean that the policy atmosphere is not conducive in England towards initiatives that cannot easily indicate competitive economic value. Quantitative assessment data possesses an (unwarranted, see Hacking, 1990) 'veneer of objectivity' that subjective reports of student outcomes struggle to attain. It is outside the scope of this paper to further consider how developments in literature on reflective practice

might be bought in to demonstrate (and probably 'calculate') the longer term economic and social value of progressive citizen education, though Stafford (2018) has explored this as a possibility.

Any revived programme of GLS would have to carefully exorcise the latent paternalism of much historical GLS, perhaps by including elements of student research and student-centred and directed curriculum. In a number of reflections, proponents have supposed that today's more politically minded students would be more receptive to the style of learning in GLS (Stafford, 2018). Such an exercise would be of enormous value in helping learners understand their place in for example decolonizing the curriculum, climate change, and consent. It would develop learners' appreciation of the limits of quantification, algorithms, and AI, of social media and the unequal benefits of communications technologies, exercise empathy, and understand of the importance of individuals and the possibility of collective action (Simmons, 2016; Stafford, 2018). Given the local and global challenges facing 16–19-year-olds today and in their futures, the aims of GLS have not lost any of their significance.

³ This is not the place to develop this line of argument, but it is plausible that in its early stages particularly GLS derived its authority from the body of disciplinary knowledge of the liberal arts and sciences which professed to contain within it the virtues by which a responsible meritocratic social elite governed. By the 1960s the validity of the claims of this body of knowledge were undermined and so too was the foundations of GLS, which had to resort to an appeal to the democratic accountability exercised through the state (see Hilliard, 2012).

Bibliography

- Bailey, B. (2018). Creating space for Liberal and General Studies in technical courses in FE. Post-16 Educator, *The Real Radical Education? Bulletin 2*. 4-7.
- Bailey, B., & Unwin, L. (2008). Fostering 'habits of reflection, independent study and free inquiry': an analysis of the shortlived phenomenon of General/Liberal Studies in English vocational education and training. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*. 60:1. 61-74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820701828861>
- Bloomer, M. (2002). *Curriculum Making in Post-16 Education: The Social Conditions of Studentship*. Taylor & Francis.
- Bourke, J. (2022). *Birkbeck: 200 Years of Radical Learning for Working People*. Oxford University Press.
- Carroll, D. (1980). Am I Communicating? An Examination of the Rise of Communication Skills' in Further Education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 4:1. 26-40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877800040104>
- Cockburn, C. (1987). *Two track training: sex inequalities and the YTS*. Macmillan Education.
- Department for Education. (4 October 2023). *A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-world-class-education-system-the-advanced-british-standard>
- Edge Foundation. (July 2023). *Debating the first principles of English vocational education: volume 5*. https://www.edge.co.uk/documents/429/DD1098_-_Principles_of_vocational_education_5_FINAL2_9gjOxqJ.pdf
- Editorial. (2018). *Post-16 Educator, The Real Radical Education? Bulletin 2*. 3.
- Fisher, R. (2004). From Business Education Council to Edexcel Foundation 1969–96: the short but winding road from technician education to instrumentalist technicism. *Journal of Education and Work*. 17:2. 237-255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080410001677428>
- Gomoluch, K., & Bailey, B. (2010). Training teachers for further and technical education: staff perceptions of changing demands and policies at Bolton from 1950 to 1988. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*. 62:2. 139-152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636821003728916>
- Hacking, I. (1990). *The Taming of Chance*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hayward, G., & Fernandez, R. M. (2004). From Core Skills to Key Skills: Fast Forward or Back to the Future? *Oxford Review of Education*. 30:1. 117-145.
- Hilliard, C. (2012). *English as a vocation: the 'Scrutiny' movement*. Oxford University Press.
- Huddleston, P., & Unwin, L. (2013). *Teaching and learning in further education: diversity and change*. Routledge.
- Huddleston, P., & Unwin, L. (2024). *Curriculum in the FE College over time: illustrations of how things change but also stay the same*. Edge Foundation.
- Janmaat, J. G. (2018). Educational influences on young people's support for fundamental British values. *British Educational Research Journal*. 44:2. 251-273. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3327>
- Kobayashi, C., Warner, P., & Dickinson, P. (2024). *Spelling it out, making it out: Functional Skills qualifications and their place in vocational training*. AELP. <https://www.aelp.org.uk/policy-and-research-topics/functional-skills-research-spelling-it-out-making-it-count/>
- Laczik, A., Dabbous, D., Patel, J., & Wilson, E. (2023). *Good Policy Making: What can we learn from past policies?* Edge Foundation. https://www.edge.co.uk/documents/351/DD0983_-_Good_Policy_Making_report.pdf
- Maguire, S. (2022). *A difficult nut to crack? How the UK has tackled the youth employment challenge*. Edge Foundation. <https://www.edge.co.uk/research/Learning-from-the-past/a-brief-history-of-youth-employment-in-the-uk/>
- Ministry of Education. (1957). *Liberal education in technical colleges*. HMSO.
- Ministry of Education. (1959). 15 to 18: *A report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)*. HMSO. <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/crowther/crowther1959-1.html>
- Ortolano, G. (2019). *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town*. Cambridge University Press.
- Patel, J. (2021). *Imagining the Role of the Student in Society: ideas of British higher education policy and pedagogy, 1957-1972*. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Warwick. http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/165628/1/WRAP_Theses_Patel_2021.pdf

- Perry, L. (2017). General Studies: the purpose. *Post-16 Educator, The Real Radical Education? Bulletin 1*. 8-12.
- Simmons, J. (2018). Liberal and General Studies: its aims, methods and topics. *Post-16 Educator, The Real Radical Education? Bulletin 2*. 8-19.
- Simmons, R. (2015). Civilising the Natives? Liberal Studies in Further Education Revisited. *British Journal of Educational Studies*. 63:1. 85-101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2014.982070>
- Simmons, R. (2016). Liberal studies and critical pedagogy in further education colleges: 'where their eyes would be opened' (sometimes). *Oxford Review of Education*. 42:6. 692-706. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2016.1226790>
- Simmons, R. (2019). The Historical Experience of Liberal Studies for Vocational Learners in Further Education. *British Journal of Educational Studies*. 67:1. 59-76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2017.1380160>
- Simmons, R. (2020). 'It wasn't the Wilt experience' (at least for some): vocational students' historical experiences of liberal studies. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*. 25:1. 91-109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2020.1720169>
- Simmons, R., Waugh, C., Hopkins, M., Perry, L., & Stafford, R. (2014). Liberal And General Studies In Further Education: Voices From The 'Chalk Face'. *Teaching in Lifelong Learning*. 6. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5920/till.2014.6132>
- Stafford, R. (2017). The context of Liberal and General Studies, 1950s - 1990s. *Post-16 Educator, The Real Radical Education? Bulletin 1*. 13-23
- Stafford, R. (2018). Liberal and General Studies: its legacy for curriculum development now. *Post-16 Educator, The Real Radical Education? Bulletin 2*. 20-27.
- Sutcliffe, M. P. (2014). The origins of the 'two cultures' debate in the adult education movement: the case of the Working Men's College (c .1854-1914). *History of Education*. 43:2. 141-159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2013.844278>
- Vernon, K. (2000). A Healthy Society for Future Intellectuals: Developing Student Life at Civic Universities. In C. Lawrence & A.-K. Mayer (Eds.), *Regenerating England: Science, Medicine and Culture in Inter-War Britain*. Brill. 179-202. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1163/97890004333345_007
- Waugh, C. (2017). The 1955 NIAE report. *Post-16 Educator, The Real Radical Education? Bulletin 1*. 4-7.



The Edge Foundation
44 Whitfield Street
London, W1T 2RH

T +44 (0)20 7960 1540

www.edge.co.uk

Making Education Relevant

www.edge.co.uk