

Research Space

Journal article

Biopolitics and lifelong learning: the vitalistic turn in English

Further Education discourse

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Abstract

This paper argues that a shift in discourse about the nature and purpose of Further Education is under way in England. A recent White Paper, “Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth” (DFE, 2021), issued by the UK government, is couched in terms which suggest that a prior reliance on the ideology of neoliberalism is now moving towards the objectives and instruments of what Michel Foucault termed biopolitics, or the exploitation of life itself. I analyse the White Paper and related recent texts to show how a form of vitalist discourse accompanies attempts to accelerate potentially problematic processes of value-extraction. While these developments respond partly to the societal changes resulting from the threats to life of the Coronavirus pandemic and other existential crises, their likely impact suggests a shift in the discourses of lifelong learning: an existing apparatus of normalization and control is now turning to biopolitical exploitation.

Introduction

In her recent article, Erika Åkerblom (2019) argues powerfully that population management techniques in Sweden reflect a long-running belief in the fundamentally inadequate nature of the population. A similar “deficit logic”¹ has long existed in the discourse of lifelong learning in England, where a tension in English Further Education (FE) has long existed between the desire of policymakers to guarantee economic security and wellbeing on one hand, and critics of policy on the other. The latter fear that developments in the agenda of lifelong learning, upskilling, and continuing professional development are misguided or coercive: lifelong education, as Åkerblom argues, is framed as a solution to a population *problem* (see also Coffield 1999; Allen and Ainley, 2007; Tett and Hamilton, 2019).

These concerns in England echo international debate about the role, purpose and instruments of lifelong education. A common feature of this debate is the underlying assumption that economic prosperity is the ultimate goal, to which a population in deficit is

¹ The issue of a “deficit model” in English Further Education has been well documented (Beighton; 2016b; 2020; see also Parker 2020).

the main barrier. At the risk of oversimplification, policymakers who have positioned lifelong learning as an instrument of economic success (be it for altruistic, electoral or cynical reasons) have been criticized for this narrow focus and its occlusion of factors such as, for instance, social cohesion or wellbeing. This suggests that the terms of the debate have been fixed, for both advocates and critics of such policies, around those of human capital development theory (see, for example, Beighton, 2015; Brown et al, 2020), a concept discussed below.

While it is true that concern for economic success has, in England at least, been a political leitmotiv, shifts are becoming visible in the reframing of the lifelong learning debate (Lauder et al, 2018). The recent White Paper (DFE, 2021) is one example: said to hold “few surprises” (Green, 2021), it represents a shift away from the exclusive interests of economic success, neo-liberal responsabilization and global competitiveness towards a very different form of population management. With its vitalist rationale, this shift is significant in that its seemingly consensual concern for health and wellbeing hides a much darker set of beliefs about lifelong learning’s *ratio essendi* and “a politic determined and governed by life” (Åkerblom, 2019, p.289) or what Michel Foucault called “biopower”.

To substantiate this analysis, I first discuss the background to the 2021 White Paper and its release in the middle of a global pandemic. Next, I lay out an analytical framework which sees an extension of biopolitical discourse in the development of vitalistic tropes in the White Paper. I then focus on the specific way the paper presents the relationship between economic goals and lifelong learning, before turning to ways in which these discursive relationships are developing in connected texts. My analysis highlights the way these texts express a discursive apparatus with three strands: the desire to exploit life forces within the population; the desire to speed up the processes of production by the latter; and a tendency to see the operation of governmentality on belligerent terms with society’s forces in conflict with its own constituents.

To see how all three are subsumed under the questionable aims of biopolitical governmentality and its singular approach to life as latent force, potential and source of value, I first sketch out the background to this White Paper, before setting out this paper’s analytical framework in biopolitics and its related vitalistic philosophy.

Background

The FE White Paper,² released on 21st January 2021, lays out reforms that, in many ways, exemplify a long-standing view in British educational politics. According to this view, the Further Education, skills, or lifelong learning sector is in urgent need of renewal. The Department for Education (DFE) continues to express its “long-running concerns” about colleges and geographical areas across England which have “persistent weaknesses” and lack the power to resolve them “until it is too late” (Camden, 2021). These concerns have existed at least since 1993, when Further Education colleges, previously under centralized local authority control, were “incorporated” as businesses. This shift in governance brought much greater operational autonomy, but critics have repeatedly highlighted its failure to solve the problems associated with the sector (e.g. Randle and Brady, 1997; Lucas and Crowther, 2016). Its attendant issues of managerialism, marketization and instability have been seen as evidence of a problematic neo-liberal education model in vogue, and a perception of persistent underperformance of the sector has prompted many calls for renewal (e.g. DFEE, 1998; DFES, 2005; 2006a; DIUS, 2008; BIS, 2011; BIS, 2012a; DFE, 2017; Ofsted, 2019; DFE 2020). Further, lifelong or vocational education in the UK has thus long been seen as the “neglected middle child”, an underfunded and politically less valuable sector than secondary and higher education (e.g.; Wallace, 2007; AOC 2021b; Keep et al, 2021).

The 2021 White Paper is part of this lineage, and itself pinpoints “[h]istoric under-investment” in the sector (DFE, 2021, p. 50). But it also arrives in the middle of a serious economic and public health crisis resulting from lockdown measures to combat a global pandemic. Official UK statistics state that COVID-19 has thus far claimed almost 150,000 deaths (Gov.UK, 2021). Moreover, it is currently estimated that 2.2 million people (6.5% of all workers) could be unemployed at the end of 2021 (ONS, 2021a). A successful regime of vaccination has led to a staged reopening of the economy and a cautious return to “normal” education, but initiatives such as employment support schemes for workers affected by the pandemic have also lifted public borrowing rates to £355bn in the current financial year. With a debt of £234bn predicted over the next year, this “enormous rise in the budget deficit” (OBR, 2021) is the highest seen by the UK outside wartime. It also compares poorly with the UK’s competitors: the UK has seen the largest contraction in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of all the G7 countries, roughly double that of comparable nations in the EU for example (ONS,

² White papers are defined by the UK Government as policy documents that set out proposals for future legislation. They often provide a basis for further consultation and discussion, thus allowing final changes to be made before a Bill is formally presented to Parliament.

2021b). The crisis has also exposed significant social – and notably racial - inequality in the country.

Despite these unique challenges, the White Paper resembles previous calls for sector change in that it reflects specific ideological tropes. For instance, calls for structural change have presented either localization or greater homogenization as the answer to this underperformance; calls to meet contemporary societal demands have focused on local employability needs and / or those of a wider, global economy; and calls for orientational change have demanded greater synergy with business interests. Asked to conform closely to the goals of the economy the adult learning sector has itself increasingly and repeatedly been expected to operate as a (quasi) market (e.g. Holford et al, 2019 see also DFES, 2005; 2006b; TUC, 2021).

Similarly, the White Paper seeks to enable greater cooperation with employers and turn colleges into 21st century business centres where curriculum decisions are directly influenced by employers (see Parker, 2020). To support this, the White Paper announces a new “lifelong loan entitlement” to fund a “lifetime skills guarantee” made by the prime minister, Boris Johnson. In addition to new quality inspection rules (Ofsted, 2019), funding and accountability regulations are to be overhauled and new centralized powers introduced. Intervention, when colleges fail to perform adequately, is facilitated (DFE, 2021).

These so-called changes demonstrate the kind of continuity analysed by Åkerblom (op.cit) and signal the fact that change itself is something of a constant in English FE. Critics have often underlined the disruption that has ensued as subsequent administrations have sought to solve the “problem” of the sector and confuse change with reform (Keep et al, 2021, p.7). Interestingly, however, the emphasis on the FE sector as a tool of economic management seems to be shifting, at least in policy terms. To see why this is the case, and why it matters, I want to suggest that the recent White Paper, while echoing many of the terms and ideas associated with FE policy over the years, suggests a significant shift towards what Michel Foucault termed “biopolitics”.

Biopolitics

It has been argued that we cannot understand the workings of power without also analysing their underpinning political rationality (Lemke, 2001, p.191). One approach to this analysis of Western governmental rationality is in the development of *biopower*, a term coined by Michel Foucault (1976a; 1976b). Grouping together the techniques of government used by a

state to manage the potential of life present in a given population, it analyses how collective power was increasingly exercised over individuals concurrently with societal developments in science, health and education in the post-enlightenment period.

Briefly, Foucault argues that a significant shift in the Western use of state power occurred in the 19th century. Since the Middle Ages, sovereign power had resided in the ability to punish and execute: power was *negative* in that it relied either on death or the right to life when threatened (1976a, p.177). More recently, Foucault argues, this Hobbesian right to *withdraw* life became a *positive* part of a network or apparatus of power focused on the *production* of life: developing through the 17th and especially towards the end of the 18th centuries (Foucault, 1976b, p.32), the right to cultivate, reinforce and organise life through technologies of control, surveillance and management constituted a new way of sustaining control without discipline. Biopolitics is, therefore, first and foremost concerned with the management of life itself rather than, say, territorial, economic or political influence. More than simply managing pools of living capital for financial gain, for Foucault biopower is the means of making life itself both the effect and instrument of power (Foucault, 1976b, p. 216).

This focus on life has brought many seemingly positive developments. Our current capacity to handle the Coronavirus with mass communication, big data and the rapid development of vaccines is just one example. We should not be surprised, then, to see connections made between the pandemic and announcements such as the White Paper. Interconnected demographic, environmental and public health crises have created the perfect conditions to accelerate many existing trends, notably in learning as a tool for the management of public health (e.g. in COF, 2020; AOC, 2021a; Giles, 2021).³

But while focussed on such literally vital issues, Foucault links the emergence of biopolitics from the 19th Century onwards with acts of violence, war and genocide far beyond anything previously conceived (1976a, p.179). Biopolitics, the strategy deployed to defend a population as a productive unit, extends the logic of war not just against threats such as death and disease, but also against societal heterogeneity, political dissent and individual choice. Biopolitics is, for Foucault, a deeply ambiguous development, involving the massification of control, normalization and state intrusion, notably via the “carceral archipelago” of institutions ranging from prisons and hospitals to schools and their shared disciplinary methods (Foucault, 1975). Accordingly, critics have used these ideas to explain

³ The White Paper’s announcement coincided with particularly poor statistics in regard to the UK’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In mid-January 2021, the United Kingdom had the worst weekly death rate in the world (OWID, 2021). 8,565 deaths between 15th and 21st January 2021 were attributed to the disease. Despite an increasingly effective recent vaccination campaign in the UK, over 100,000 deaths were recorded by 31st January (UK Government, 2021).

various phenomena related to lifelong learning(see for example Olssen, 2006, p. 214; Fejes and Nicoll, 2008). These range from the proliferation of confessional pedagogies, data-farming and surveillance to the management of health, disability and employability in education contexts (e.g. Selwyn, 2014; Wittman, 2016; Hope, 2016; Åkerblom, 2019; Kauppila et al, 2020).

These developments signal something of a reversal of the economic logic of neo-liberalism with which the agenda(s) of lifelong learning has often been compared. For Foucault, writing in the 1970's, biopower was certainly indispensable to capitalism. But more recent developments in globalization lead us to question the workings of the wider economic system and its assumptions. Globalization, fuelled by technological changes accelerated by the pandemic has increasingly relied on investment in immaterial forms of value creation rather than the traditional manufacture and exchange of goods. Education has grown in importance as a creator of cognitive capital (the value obtained from ideas, inventions and access to knowledge) and the prime vector of creativity and innovation for the global economy: economic success increasingly depends on the cultivation and the harvesting of creative capital often, but not exclusively, in digital form (Beighton, 2017b, see also Gray, 2016).

Thus, the advent of biopolitics, Foucault argues, superseded purely economic interests, focusing primarily on mass population management and conflict with any body which impedes its drive to extract living potential (Foucault, 1976b, pp. 15-16; 194). Management though biopower becomes indispensable because this potential, by definition, is unruly. Politics, which becomes increasingly interested in managing creative potential, must now be defended *against those it creates*, Foucault argues. This is why biopolitics, he insists, is not just an ideology of general population management, but a form of racism. By this, he means that the state stands in permanent conflict with those it must subject in order to achieve its object (Foucault, 1976b, p. 53;76).

Power's highest function is therefore no longer to inflict death but rather, through techniques of wholesale medicalization, homogenization and centralization, to *invest life through and through*.⁴ This involves a form of vitalism which seeks to maximise a population's vital forces and extract them (Foucault, 1976b, p.219). Biopower, which is essentially normalizing to facilitate this extraction (1976a, p.190), exists to exploit these "forces" of "life" by for example the controlled expansion and growth of bodies via institutions such as schools and

⁴ "un pouvoir dont la plus haute fonction désormais n'est peut-être plus de tuer mais d'investir la vie *de part en part*" (Foucault, 1976a:183, my emphasis) Foucault's characteristic "perhaps" , "maybes" and frequent modal auxiliaries can be obscured by translation and here indicate simultaneously the irony of a thesis that life and death are two sides of the same political activity, its instability as knowledge and thus the possibility of subversion (see Rambeau, 2006; Veyne, 2008).

workplaces, the family and the clinic. It is the vitalistic extraction of time and labour from living potential rather than the production of goods and resources *per se* (Rambeau, 2006, pp.104- 107).

The Mechanistic nature of Human Capital Theory

The extent to which these developments represent a complete break with previous discourses in lifelong learning depends largely how we assesses and define these trends. A useful contrast, however, lies between the mechanistic discourse of human capital development in the English FE context and the expression of vitalistic tropes in the more recent White paper.

Indeed, much policy in lifelong learning has reflected the mechanistic bent of human capital theory (HCT) often attributed to Becker (1975). Perhaps most obvious in lifelong learning policy since the 1990s when it was described as a “renewed commitment to self-improvement” in England (DFEE, 1998, p.8), HCT links individual knowledge, skills and their development to income production. A key feature of HCT is its reliance on a causal chain which links capital to individual productivity and thus income (Fix, 2018). This echoes the much older idea of knowledge which sees it as an “engine of production” which “enable[s] us to *subdue Nature* and force[s] her to satisfy our wants” (Marshall, 1920, p. 18 – my emphasis). Education, accordingly, is defined as “a critical component of a country’s human capital”, and seeks to increase the efficiency of every individual worker so that economies can “move up the value chain” (Grant, 2017. p. 2 see also WEF, 2016).

HCT’s mechanistic desire to “subdue nature” also surfaces in more recent policy driven by the demands of a technology-driven “fourth industrial revolution” and its related “skills gap” (Nevin, 2016; Lauder, 2020; Spöttl and Windelband, 2021). Reducing this gap and enhancing national economic competitiveness demanded a “core focus on skills and employability” to increase “the pool of employable people” (DFES, 2005, p. vii; see also DFEE, 2000; DFES, 2000; DFES 2006a; DFES 2006b; BIS 2012a for example). HCT thus saw FE as a sector to be closely managed “as though desired outcomes can be engineered through targets and funding mechanisms” (Nash et al 2008, p.18). This meant that the “untapped and vast” population (DFES 2006b, p.1) was seen as subservient to lifelong learning as the “engine room” or “powerhouse” at the “cutting edge” of industrial progress (see for example; UKCES, 2010; BIS, 2012a; CAVTL, 2013).

Thus, until very recently, these mechanistic assumptions have driven policy, reviews and (in many cases) attitudes. Ultimately, in the learning sphere, this “deeply flawed” logic (Fix, 2018, p.15) means that people themselves are treated as commodities to be developed,

packaged and distributed as human capital quanta. Improvements in life-chances, here, are tied to improvements in skills, occupations and earnings, with noticeably less interest in health wellbeing or social cohesion (e.g. BIS, 2015, pp.13-14). Further Education is framed as a tool of social mobility by some (BIS, 2012b; BIS; 2015; DFE, 2017) and as a tool of social control by others (e.g. Simmons and Thompson, 2008; Tett and Hamilton, 2019). For others, the goals of social mobility and social control are contiguous parts of the same instrumentalization of mobility, change and speed which announce the biopolitical developments discussed below (see for example Virilio, 2012; Beighton, 2017a).

The point of contrast here is between human capital's mechanistic objectification of learners as commodities to be developed and more recent attempts, echoed in the 2021 White Paper, to subjectify them in line with a more vitalistic biopolitical view. Here, despite superficial similarities, the *subject* of biopolitics is no longer an *object* to be enhanced by external means (such as training, performance management, motivation and management theories and so on) but rather a living receptacle of creative energy to be managed from *the inside*. This is why biopower also seeks the instrumentalization of sexuality and broader biological capacities through medicine, policing and especially lifelong, lifewide education. While critics previously have rightly noted "a desire in elite policy circles to achieve, build or assert consensus over purpose" (Holford et al 2019, iii), biopolitical management now sees consensus itself as the purpose.

Reasons for this shift may certainly be linked to doubts about contemporary forms of neo-liberal capitalism which arose after the 2008 "credit crunch". The weakening of nation-states and processes of individual responsabilization, so often used to counter "risk society" (Kalenda and Kočvarová, 2020), are now being questioned by a UK government forced to intervene by existential risks such the 2008 banking crisis and the Coronavirus pandemic. That said, given the frequent identification of lifelong learning policy and practice in the 21st century with those of neo-liberalism and the primacy of economic goals, it is tempting to see Foucault's view as outdated, misguided or cynical (see, for instance Pluckrose and Lindsay, 2020). However, the 2021 FE White Paper "Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth" signals a discursive shift which suggests that his analysis may be of contemporary relevance. To demonstrate both the extent to which its discourse reflects Foucault's predictions about the development of biopower and its consequences for lifelong learning as a phenomenon of global importance, I first want to highlight the role of vitalism in both in the Paper and the ministerial speech that preceded it.

Vitalism

Biopower implies vitalism insofar as it relies in the belief in some unique, ineffable power of life. For vitalists, life originates in a single principle, force or living property inherent to living things. Vitalists thus distinguish animate from inanimate objects, believing that this unique force cannot be explained by or reduced to physical or chemical factors alone. These ideas were particularly popular at the end of the 19th century, when adherents such as Hans Driesch (1867–1941) denied mechanistic attempts to explain systems by referring only to their constituent parts. More recent attempts to explain the emergence of properties and the capacity of complex systems to self-organise include James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock, 2000) and Lynn Margulis's proposal that endosymbiotic relationships drive evolutionary change rather than, say, competition between species (Sagan, 1967).

Such proposals have been much debated in both scientific and philosophical circles. Related questions such as 'what is life' remain unanswered, and vitalism has been criticized for its inflationism: as Henri Bergson (1907/2013) famously pointed, postulating one, simple unexplained entity in order to explain other much more complex processes leads nowhere. Indeed, positing some immaterial drive in this way implies a belief in systemic teleology which neither experience nor evidence bear out. The point, therefore, is that vitalism's claims are not just simplistic and unnecessary, but also obfuscatory. While historically important, therefore, vitalism is now often associated with obscurantism, pseudo-science and a lack of rigour and credibility (Dema, 2007; see also Weber, 2010; Osborne, 2016; Coulter et al. 2019).

[The FE White paper](#)

The purpose of this paper, however, is not to critique vitalism specifically. Instead, I want to discuss its tropes and the way they express a "vitalistic turn" and thus the operation of biopolitics in sector discourse. I want to suggest that the existence of vitalistic language and ideas indicates an emerging discourse of biopolitical management in an area which, until recently, expressed itself in the more mechanistic language and assumptions of Human Capital Theory.

Certainly, the White Paper's title "Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth" echoes the familiar Human Capital logic of skills-based productivism noted above. Looking more closely at the 2021 Paper itself, however, suggests that the terms *lifelong* and *growth* in its title can be understood in a specifically *biopolitical* way:

This White Paper is not just about a *new economic dawn* for the country, crucial though that it is. At its most fundamental it is about fulfilment and

enrichment on a personal level. For too long we have *squandered* much of our *latent creativity and talent*: this White Paper will be *the lever to unleash it*. It will ensure that people can learn the skills they need to get great jobs, as well as provide the means to plan *a fulfilling and productive life*.

(DFE, 2021, p. 4 *my emphasis*)

There seems little to disagree with in this introduction by Gavin Williamson (Secretary of State for Education since 2019) until one recognises the biopolitical content signalled by its use of vitalistic tropes. Unlike its predecessors, and explicitly undermining the mantra of human capital development for economic prosperity, it openly talks about change at a more “fundamental” level. This vague (but literally essential) level is that of creativity, a “latent” force and its anagrammatic correlate, “talent”. Etymologically, talent refers to a quantity of money ⁵, but here the reference is to the *creative* capacity that each individual is expected to demonstrate. This precious latent capacity must no longer be “squandered”, and on the contrary should be “unleashed” by pulling the right “lever”: people are here compared not to machines but to racing hounds, too long restrained, and who should be released so that we can all benefit from their innate potential to produce “productive lives”.

It is therefore striking that the White Paper repeatedly implies a belief in such a power, energy or *élan* and which must be not be wasted. As we have seen, the Paper’s desire to “capitalise on the potential of digital learning” (DFE, 2021, p.43) is not new; but seen through the lens of biopolitics denotes a shift of interest from the profitability of production to that of innate productive potential *per se* by attempting, now, to exploit life’s creativity itself. This is a form of overtly “metaphysical capitalism” wherein profitability is derived from potential as a virtual “neo-commodity” (Lash, 2007, p. 9). The lifelong learner, here, is both producer and consumer, involved in “the production of possibles” (Tarde, in Cronin, 2008, p. 297) and is thus a vital biopolitical player in the exchange of bio-technological or bio-informational capital (Toscano, 2007, pp. 74-82).

It is significant that the use of such language does not start with White Paper itself, suggesting a degree of intention. In a speech announcing the Paper’s “vital opportunity” before its publication, Minister Gavin Williamson insists on the vitalistic tropes necessary to biopolitical discourse:

⁵ According to Merriam Webster, the term talent was first used to refer to a unit of weight of gold or silver, presaging the (doubtless unwitting) alchemical references to transformation, quickening and base metal highlighted below.

[The Paper is] a pathway to a career that brings job satisfaction and fulfilment; a skills revolution that will enable businesses to thrive and finally, as we emerge from this awful pandemic, a clear route to a dynamic and prosperous new future.

(Williamson, 2020)

Here, references to prosperity are couched in vitalistic terms of *thriving* and *dynamism*, rather than, for instance, purely economic gains or even sustainability. As in the Paper itself, these terms stress the cyclical nature of this dynamism for those who need to retrain and upskill “at any point” in their working lives. This constant retraining and upskilling *at any point* imply the existence of some unending source of dynamic, vital power.⁶ The same markers reoccur in references to acceleration by mapping pathways and routes intended to drive standards and homogenization in the face of imminent threat, thus signalling lifelong learning’s key role in biopolitical population management.

The discourse’s vitalism is also echoed by its quasi-religious tone. Stressing the “successes” of getting more and more students online to protect their “learning”, Williamson’s “vision” admits to “preaching to the converted”. The developments in question reflect both a shared missionary zeal and, Williamson argues, profound change for the sector:

I’m not alone in this *crusade*. It is a *mission* that is shared by the Prime Minister.

FE should no longer hide its “vast potential under a bushel”, another vitalistic goal couched in biblical language. This means providing “more than one route to success”, because FE in particular has “so much more to offer”. This is possible because of vitalist beliefs in the somewhat numinous transformation of potential into value:

A word you often hear in relation to education is ‘potential’. We’ve all got it, although some may have more of it than others. But potential is not just a human asset, it’s a social one, it’s an economic one and it’s certainly a business one. Potential is what can turn base metal into gold.

⁶ Such references to dynamism (a phenomenon marked by continuous and productive activity or change according to Merriam Webster) reflect the term’s derivation from Greek: *dynamikós* (“powerful” or “efficacious”) and *dýnamis* (“power, strength, capability”) clearly reflect the fundamental vitalism at play. For the explicit links between these terms and their connotations, see for example Brown, 1974)

These “radical, long-term changes” are intended to “transform the life chances for every young person and adult in the country”. England, he says, is “bursting with potential” waiting to be unlocked (ibid) from its apparently ubiquitous presence across so many different areas of activity.

Speed and acceleration

Such vitalistic tropes reoccur throughout the Paper: in the 73 pages of the White Paper, in various combinations the word *life* appears 62 times, *vital* appears 7 times, *force* is used 32 times; *potential* appears 12 times; *grow* is used 20 times; increase appears 25 times; and *expand* appears 12 times.

These terms are not uncommon in sector discourse, but taken together, in the context of a public health crisis and developments such as those discussed by Åkerblom and others, they are at least suggestive of the kind of vitalism on which biopower relies. This is also echoed in the way they also indicate a desire to accelerate these processes through a focus on changes that benefit from existing talents, skills and potentials. In order that FE “realises its true potential that it has to offer the whole country” (sic), new qualifications will be “rolling out” and funds will be provided to refurbish aging infrastructure. This investment is expected to facilitate the labour flow so that people “don’t have to move” for training or education and so that employers have skilled people “right on their doorsteps” (Williamson, 2020). The kind of social mobility that places the responsibility for human capital development on the shoulders of the mobile individual is therefore changing to a focus on speed: if 90% of people will need new skills by 2030, Williamson reminds us that “[t]hat’s only a short time away and we have to act, and we have to act quickly” (op.cit.)

These frequent references to speed and acceleration in the Paper itself do not merely identify a pot of living energy to be unleashed, but rather that this unleashing should itself happen more and more quickly:

As the *rate of technological change* increases, further education will be crucial to building *an agile and adaptable workforce*. Provision will be *flexible* – whether full-time or part-time; on-the-job or off-the-job; a *first ever job*, or a change of career. Everyone will have the chance to *retrain, update* their skills and move into *growth* sectors, *when* they need to.

(DFE, 2021, p. 4, my emphasis)

The Paper puts thus a kind of self-perpetuating *movement* at the heart of its intention as a “blueprint for the future”. This is the telos of mobility as we “move on from previous underestimations of further and technical education” and “reinforce” its importance as “a pathway to a bright future” (DFE, 2021, p.3).

These tropes give a clear image of what learning is intended to be in the 21st century: learning to accelerate. To facilitate this, the government hopes to establish “pathways” (mentioned 8 times) and “routes” (27 times) that will “boost” (6 times) employability. These spatial references, couched alongside less mechanistic terms, express the teleology in traditional vitalism, criticized by Bergson, above: this is the space of paths, maps, and linear journeys with preordained endings and purposes. The aim is to provide an organized apparatus to accelerate the extraction of the job-ready potential bursting out of the nation:

This combination of provision enables people to leave education well prepared to be successful and productive in their chosen occupation – and provides employers with a pipeline of job-ready employees.

(DFE, 2021, p.34)

These references to the channels of learning help explain what the term “opportunity” means⁷: getting out of education *as soon as possible* and moving down a ready-made pipeline into an area where they can be truly productive and constitute a seamless stream of workers, ready to go. “Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth” represents the logical (and logistical) development of the “liquefaction” of lifelong learning wherein learning itself is reduced to a question of logistical flow, at least in the discourse of those who promote it. Having established the channels, pipelines and chains where influence can flow, attention has turned to speed and the means to increase it (Beighton 2016a; 2017a).

This desire to establish pathways, routes and pipelines for the development of learning provision represents a response to the phenomenon of rapid change. But it is clear, too, that fast change *per se* is not the issue: it’s the *acceleration* of the *rate of change* that is in question. We must “improve the speed and effectiveness of support” (DFE, 2021:54) and we cannot delay, because the “needs of the economy are changing *right now*”. “[P]rogress is needed *at speed*”, and providers should “change their offers *now*” so that learner can “*start having* the opportunities they need and deserve” (DFE, 2021, p. 42. My emphasis). Ultimately, behind these attempts to guarantee ever faster flows of cognitive capital, the

⁷ Once again, etymologically speaking the term does not refer to an open ended chance but rather the successful completion of an existing trajectory: derived from the latin *ob+portus*, it refers to a return to harbour.

discursive agenda now reflects the overt extension of biopower through the mechanisms of lifelong learning.

The point here is that terms such as *progress* (53 mentions), *develop* (123 mentions) and even *stimulate* (10 mentions) need to be understood in their vitalistic context and co-text. Such terms are of course common in much FE policy discourse from recent years, but here they reflect a shift away from mechanistic language of human capital theory. The kinds of progress and development mentioned in the Paper no longer refer to the external management of economic potential, but the internalized exploitation of vital potential for growth and creativity. This shift must be understood in a vitalistic light as an unfolding⁸ of potential in a repetitive cycle of extraction. When technology itself is endowed with some vitalistic will-to-power, this speeding up of the context – of life itself - makes very specific demands on the humans operating within it. They too must be quick, agile, flexible and respond ever more quickly to these forces. We have seen how biopolitics is a fundamentally belligerent technique of governance, and it is interesting to see how the White Paper reflects even this approach in its championing of “bootcamps” where trainees can pick up new skills in 12-16 weeks. In one case study, a “Beat the bots Bootcamp” (DFE, 2021, p.31) is exemplified as successful development of skills. Thus, while the White Paper is a “vital opportunity” for collaboration with its “potential and its power to transform lives”, the point is, he says, that “[w]e do not have a second to waste this potential any longer” (sic).

The reason for this is the much-discussed change in the way working lives work: multiple jobs and career changes are taken for granted, implying the multiple re-training trumpeted by the Paper. References to timing stress the accelerating pace of change and the ticking clock that demands constant updating, upskilling and immediate response to such needs. These demands are backed up by biopolitical threats. Policy will need to “help drive business” and develop “employer-led standards” for Further Education. This is needed because there has been “far too much training for jobs that don’t exist.” Consequently, Williamson promises “bring an end to getting a qualification for its own sake”. This means both transformation (a “wholesale re-balancing of academic and technical education”) and homogenization (“a stronger alignment with what our country and the economy needs”). Space is the place of the first ever job, the first entry into new growth sectors, but it is also the Sisyphean cycle of

⁸ Merriam Webster gives the etymology as deriving from Old French *desveloper* or *desvoluper*, meaning to unwrap, unfold or expose. Modern figurative use, as in the White Paper, means to “unfold more fully, bring out the potential” Often used as a synonym of change, its use in a semantic field of vitalism takes on the biological meaning of a process of natural growth, differentiation and evolution <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/develop>

retraining and restarting again from zero: the new dawn of life and an overt focus on the biopolitical in Further Education discourse.

Think-tanks

Such tropes are influential in themselves, but their adoption is not limited to Ministerial announcements. Days before the Paper's release, Policy Exchange, the UK's self-proclaimed leading think-tank, asked for "a system which places *ultimate power* in the hands of learners and employers but also builds *capacity* and expertise in institutions and ultimately, *drives economic renewal and growth*" (Policy Exchange, 2021, my emphasis). Similarly, Geoff Mulgan, speaking as Professor of Collective Intelligence, Public Policy and Social Innovation at University College London and representative of Demos Helsinki, recently argued that collective imaginations must be "quickened"⁹, by which he contrasts a perceived decline with a set of beliefs about a more vital, generative and accelerated form of imagination about the future:

We find it easy to imagine apocalypse and disaster; or to imagine *new generations* of technology. But we find it much harder than in the past to imagine a better society a *generation* or more into the future. There are many possible reasons for this *decline*; loss of confidence in *progress and grand narratives*; declining imaginative *capacity*; *slowing down* of innovation.

(Mulgan, 2020, p.3, my emphasis)

The best way of halting this decline, Mulgan says, is to foster the "*generative ideas*" which "*fuel*" our progress and understanding. The methods used to "*stimulate*" such imagination are vitalist, ranging from "*sparkling creativity*" to "*cultivating estrangement*" from majority beliefs. The goal, he says is "*reviving*" shared imaginations so that that communities can rediscover their telos: once again becoming active "*heroes in their own history*" rather than passive observers.

Responses to FE White Paper

⁹ Merriam Webster defines the term as to make alive or revive; to cause to be enlivened or stimulate; to make more rapid, hasten, accelerate

While the role of biopolitical discourse can be identified in the White Paper and in the ideas of these think-tanks, similar tropes also exist in the responses to the Paper. This suggests that the shift towards a biopolitical understanding of the goals and techniques of lifelong learning is spreading outwards to non-governmental bodies.

These include the representatives of qualification awarding body City & Guilds Group, who agree with its view that “the fundamental role of FE [lies] in delivering the skills pipeline of essential talent” currently needed (FE News, 2021). Linking the White Paper and the COVID crisis, the attempt to “grow back from Covid-19” and “power our recovery” and “get our economy firing on all cylinders” follows this theme. It is notable that the Chief Executive of the FAB (Federation of Awarding Bodies) appreciates the White Paper’s approach because its “narrative helps frame a direction of travel for how the skills sector will evolve” in the context of Covid 19, particularly, he says, since “we build a more dynamic economy based on higher levels of productivity and skills” (FAB, 2021). Statements such as “[g]oing forward, it is vital that the education system is seen as ‘one system’ “ (O’Brien, 2021), or even the insistence on the paper’s “evolutionary tactics” (Russell, 2021)¹⁰ are suggestive of a development in the way lifelong learning is being described as a living system rather than as a mechanistic one driven by the causal logic of HCT.

However, while the language highlighted here gives the Paper a certain grandiloquence, its critics have focused on its limited scope. Eminent educational researcher Ewart Keep’s views are typical of those who welcome the general thrust of the Paper while questioning its long-term impact (see for example Hughes in Parker, 2020). Keep, who fears the reforms may not “take full advantage of the transformational potential” of institutions, echoes the vitalistic tropes above by suggesting that they should guarantee long-term investment in order to “empower people with opportunities for lifelong learning and support, to boost productivity” (COF, 2020; see also COF, 2021). Less sympathetic critics include the University and College Union (UCU), the trades union for college and university professionals (<https://www.ucu.org.uk/>) which frequently campaigns against staff burnout and growing stress levels. The increased administrative workloads promised by the current government’s centralization agenda and its reliance on dubious metrics and box-ticking exercises are unwelcome for this reason (UCU, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c). Similarly, the Trades Union Congress criticises further demands on the sector’s creativity and flexibility and the increased influence of business on curricula and of centralized control. At the same time, nothing is being done to solve issues such as pay gaps or the imbalance of power between

¹⁰ Russell is speaking here as the CEO of the Education and Training Foundation, the professional body for FE teachers.

stakeholders (TUC, 2021). The long-term financial health of the sector, some feel, remains uncertain, just as the sector's "failed experiment" of underfunding, competition and fragmentation over the last three decades has left both colleges and communities poorer (UCU, 2021a).

Conclusion

In this paper I have drawn attention to a turn to biopolitical management of Further Education in England. Discourse in this area has often been driven by the mechanistic assumptions of Human Capital Theory, and a strong economic focus certainly remains. However, the 2021 White Paper suggests that the vitalistic assumptions of biopolitical discourse may be emerging at a time when nations are challenged by a raft of existential challenges, not least Coronavirus and its overt threat to life.

Thus significant voices in the sector are adding to the White Paper's biopolitical aim of supporting the "lifelong education and skills needs of more than half the population", an ambition "at the heart of the pandemic build back" (AOC, 2021b, sic). This suggests at least the beginnings of a shift for those who use vitalistic tropes to describe the wider world of lifelong learning as a "more cradle to grave, universalist, approach to lifelong learning" (FAB, 2021).

We need to understand what this concern represents and implies: an acceleration of the normalization, medicalization and management of human potential seen as a threat to be governed, controlled and exploited. The 2021 Paper's vitalism signals the emergence of a biopolitics which seeks to exploit life forces within the population; a desire to speed up the processes of production by the latter; and a tendency to see the operation of governmentality on belligerent terms with society's forces in conflict with its own constituents. Thus, with biopower, life itself enters history, and biology enters politics "at the level of life itself" (Foucault, 1976a, p.188).

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