

Missing the story: the UK media's neglect of Further Education

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KEY POINTS

- Newspapers and other media outlets do not pay enough attention to Further Education (FE) and the people who engage in it. They give disproportionate amounts of coverage to Higher Education (HE), which is directly relevant to fewer people.
- Neglect of FE is symptomatic of a media industry that has undergone an important – but rarely discussed – shift towards journalism being dominated by university graduates.
- Media neglect of FE is associated with political neglect – just as journalists write less about FE than HE, politicians talk less about it.
- By ignoring FE and its role in the communities it serves, media outlets are failing to recognise the increasing importance of educational experience as a key factor in voting intention and other political behaviour.
- FE and the skills it can impart should be seen by the media and politicians as a central element of any debate about “levelling up” and other attempts to address regional economic disparities and increase UK productivity.

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Thank you to my SMF colleagues Amy Norman and Aveek Bhattacharya for research support and editing help.

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Introduction

This essay is not a conventional think-tank report. It is not, directly at least, about government policies or national priorities, but about the climate in which policies and priorities are set. It is about education, but also about journalism and the media industry, and it is written by a former journalist who still, from time to time, works in that tradeⁱ.

Journalism matters. Even though the media industry and its staff are – and when has this not been the case? – today living through a period of public scepticism and commercial challenge, the work of reporting events and ideas of public interest and importance really does have profound impact. The selection of topics for coverage matters most of all. What makes news – and what does not – helps shape those national priorities, from which flow decisions by politicians and other policymakers about how to allocate scarce resources, including money and – sometimes more valuable -- attention.

This essay is about something that doesn't make news, doesn't get covered, and the effects that has. It's about Further Education (FE).

FE is the bit of the education system that doesn't get talked about, at least by the people who lead what could be called our national conversation: journalists and politicians who participate in an ongoing debate about the most important issues facing the country and its people. We don't talk about FE.

I say "we" there quite deliberately, because I can probably claim to be part of that national conversation. As the director of a prominent think-tank at Westminster, I write for -- and am sometimes quoted in -- newspapers and magazines about policy and politics, and sometimes speak on TV and radio. I came to this role after 20 years in journalism. Until 2017, I was employed full-time as a journalist at a national newspaper, where my roles

ⁱ I graduated from Edinburgh University with a degree in politics in 1999. Between 1997 and 2017 I was employed by media outlets including the *Scotsman*, *Bloomberg News* and the *Daily Telegraph*, where I was political editor and later executive editor. I became SMF director in March 2017, since when I have written on a freelance basis for newspapers and magazines including the *Times*, *Telegraph*, *Independent*, *Financial Times*, *Sun*, *Evening Standard*, *New Statesman*, and *Mail on Sunday*. I write regularly for the *Spectator*, though I have no contractual obligation there.

included political editor and executive editor. If you buy into the idea that Westminster is a village that dominates national life, I suppose I count as a resident of that village. And the village does not talk about FE – or the people who are engaged in it.

There is no avoiding the fact that FE is complicated. It's delivered by collegesⁱⁱ – 238 of them across the UK – but also by a range of other “providers” including local authorities, private companies and employers. The education they offer covers a huge range of topics and levels of attainment, generally with a focus on skills directly relevant to a workplace.

To say that such education and the skills it provides are important is a gross understatement. This isn't the place for a lengthy examination of the UK's productivity challenges, so let's just say that it is very, very hard to see how we'll ever increase the long-term growth potential of the UK economy – and thus, increase wages and wealth – without improving the skills of our workforce. “Productivity isn't everything, but, in the long run, it is almost everything,” said the economist, Paul Krugman. Skills aren't the only part of productivity, but they are a part of it. So the education and training provided in FE are – or should be – a central part of the story of Britain's economic future in the 21st Century.

Should be, but aren't. Because too often, the people who are supposed to tell that big story – about what sort of country we are, could be and want to be – don't talk about FE, its role in our country, and the people who benefit from it.

Not a story for us, thanks

It is almost two years since the Augar Review of post-18 education and funding was published. That review, commissioned by Theresa May, could have been an opportunity to discuss some of those national priorities.

In its introduction, the Augar report makes a simple, stark point about education, public spending and national priorities:

“...2017-18, over £8 billion was committed to support 1.2 million UK undergraduate students in English HE institutions...There are 2.2 million full- and part-time adult further education (FE) students receiving £2.3 billion of public funding.”¹

When the then Prime Minister launched the Augar report, she took questions from members of the national media about its contents and recommendations. Most of those recommendations concerned the FE sector and the technical and vocational education it provides. None of the questions put to May by the national media did: all were about Higher Education funding and the fees that are paid by the minority of school-leavers who enrol at universities as undergraduate students.

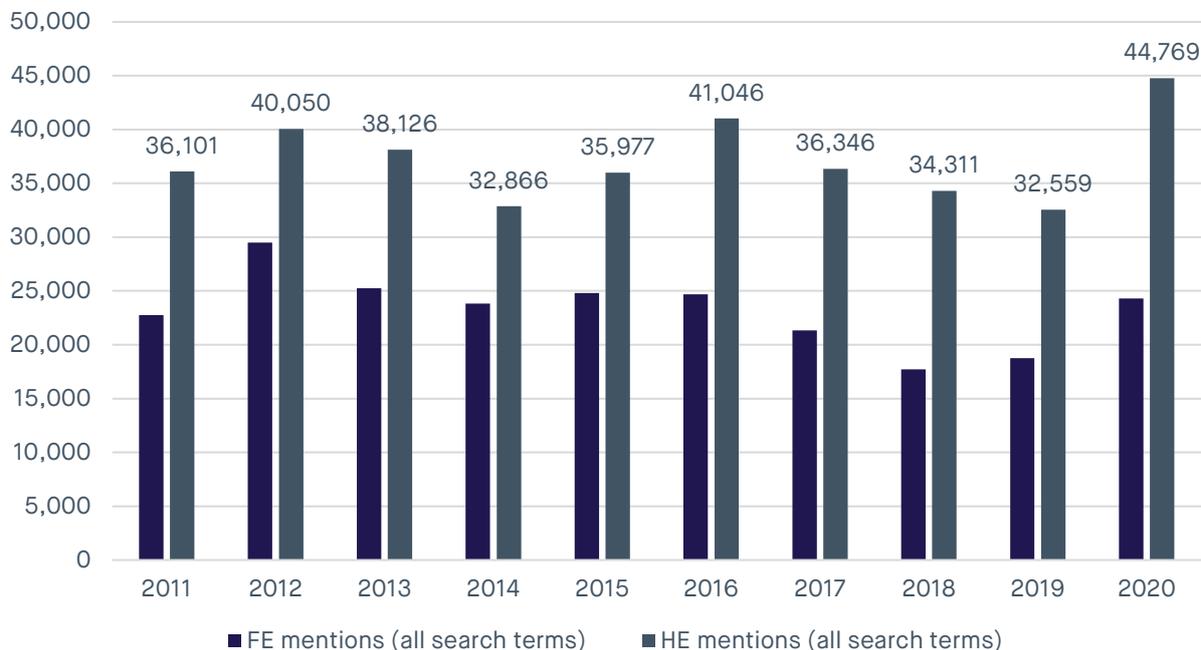
At the end of her appearance, May offered a gentle rebuke to the national media correspondents covering the event, tacitly accusing them of ignoring the other parts of the post-18 education system.²

It didn't make any difference. the only media query she received that touched on FE came from *FE Week*, a specialist outlet that covers a sector that bigger, national organisations routinely neglect or simply ignore. At the same time, those same organisations devote significant time and resource to covering HE, universities and their students.

ⁱⁱ These include general FE colleges, sixth-form colleges, land colleges and art schools.

The difference in coverage is simple to illustrate. The sort of cuttings check that used to be a staple of journalism shows that between 2011 and 2020, HE got more than twice as many mentions in national and major regional newspapers as FE did.³

Figure 1: Media mentions related to FE and HE, national and regional press



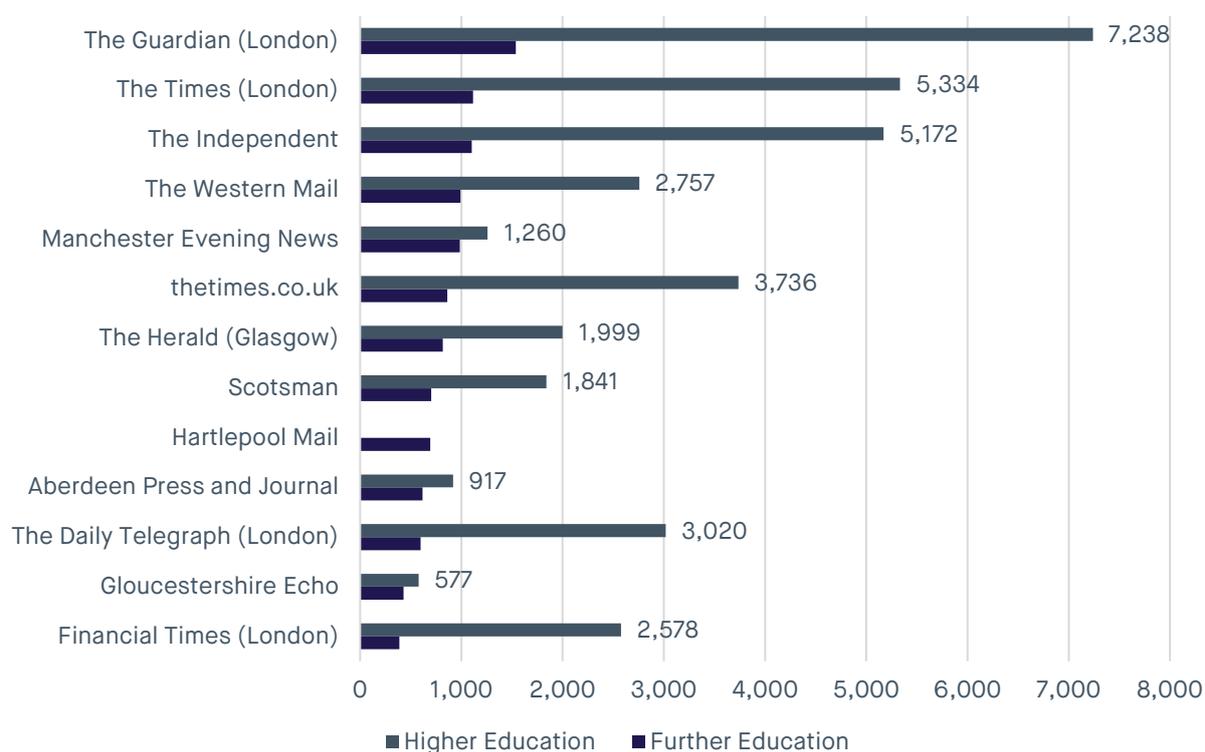
Source: LexisNexis

Even those figures are skewed by the inclusion of regional outlets. Newspapers catering to particular cities, towns and regions are more likely to regard FE colleges and FE students as worthy of coverage. I’ll come back to the reasons for this, and its importance to politics.

If we look solely at national news outlets, the preference for HE over FE “content” is even more apparent. Especially when compared to the regional press.

The *Hartlepool Mail* (693 mentions) wrote about FE more often than the *Daily Telegraph* (597)ⁱⁱⁱ. The *Gloucestershire Echo* (428) wrote about FE more often than the *Financial Times* (388). That last figure is all the more striking given the importance of skills and training to the businesses that are a staple of FT coverage.

ⁱⁱⁱ I was employed at the *Telegraph* for seven of the 10 years covered by the search, and wrote regularly about education issues as part of my duties as a political correspondent and commentator. I don’t recall ever writing about FE, and a search of my personal cuttings yields nothing. I share responsibility for the oversight this paper describes.

Figure 2: Selected titles, ranked by mentions of FE

Source: LexisNexis

Dog bites man – but why?

So far, nothing I've written will surprise anyone who is either familiar with FE or the media. People in FE know that FE gets ignored by the media. People in the media sometimes know that they're ignoring FE; sometimes they don't even know it's there, so they're not even aware that they're ignoring it.

My evidence for that last assertion is anecdotal, but they're anecdotes collected over two decades of experience in major media outlets. I was never an education specialist, but I wrote and edited enough education-related stories and other coverage to feel confident I know what makes news on the education beat. And FE does not.

Why not? Why do those two million and more people in FE get so much less attention than the much smaller group who attend universities? Why does so much national media coverage proceed from the (sometimes unconscious) assumption that the educational norm is to study A-levels until 18, then move on to undergraduate study?

That path is actually taken by less than half of all British school pupils^{iv}. Not that you'd know it from national media coverage of A-level exam results, a staple of summer newslists spawning coverage that only very rarely acknowledges, and then in passing,

^{iv} Yes, HE participation among school-leavers has reached 50%. But not everyone who goes to university has done A-levels: significant numbers enter HE having done BTECs and other vocational qualifications. In the north-east of England, for instance, 35 percent of white working-class students who went to university entered solely on the basis of BTECs. See this SMF report for more: <https://www.smf.co.uk/half-white-working-class-black-british-students-england-get-university-vocational-qualifications-btecs/>

that there are some other 18-year-olds out there who might have done some other sort of qualification and who might not be going on to university.

Why do so many journalists, intelligent, inquiring people employed to scrutinise and reveal, appear to have such a blind spot when it comes to a significant part of the country's education system and population?

Sometimes, there is a bit of hard-headed commercial calculation at work. Newspapers write about the things and people that they judge to be of interest to their readers. In the case of broadsheet newspapers, the imperative towards HE coverage this creates is clear. Where those readers are themselves more likely than the wider population to be university-educated, it can seem natural to focus on HE. Not least because the children and grandchildren of people who went to university are then more likely than average to go to university themselves.

Advertisers play a role here too. Graduates generally have higher earnings than people with the vocational and technical qualifications often obtained via FE^v. And higher earners are often a more desirable audience for those advertisers, with inevitable consequences for coverage.

But those calculations are nowhere near enough to fully explain the neglect of FE. Newspapers routinely write about all manner of subjects that don't directly relate to the lives of their readers or touch on the interests of their advertisers, and quite right too. The best journalism is in the interest of the public as a whole, not a subset of that public. Over my time in journalism, I was involved in countless decisions about the prominence that should be afforded to stories and other content and almost without exception, questions such as "what will the readers think?" or "will this help sell advertising?" were utterly eclipsed by: "Is this the best story of the day?"

Commercial gain and audience-seeking also can't explain the fact that newspapers aren't the only media outlets that neglect FE. I haven't mentioned the BBC so far, and I can't easily offer figures measuring the attention it gives to FE and HE. But I feel confident in saying that the Corporation also favours HE over FE in volume and frequency of coverage, at least at the level of national output. Not least because that national BBC output can follow the agenda set by newspapers

Journalism, a job for graduates

No, the reasons for the media as a whole neglecting FE are deeper and less calculated than journalists chasing money or clicks. Those reasons are a function of who journalists are.

Here I'm going to quote Tony Gallagher, who has been editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sun* and who is today the deputy editor of the *Times*. That makes him one of the most experienced editors on what used to be Fleet Street.

In 2016, Gallagher said this about journalists and journalism:

*"I think one of the mistakes the media industry has made over the last 20 years is it has become that **you have to have a degree and then a post-graduate MA in journalism** and I think it is a shame that we seem to have cut off that route of*

^v You can get a degree via FE too, but that's one of several complexities I'm deliberately skating over in the hopes of making this report accessible to people unfamiliar with the sector.

coming into the trade at the age of 18, without necessarily going into the third tier of education.”⁴

I entirely agree with him, and not just because he’s my former editor and a man for whom I have great respect. Or because his current paper sometimes publishes my columns. It’s because he’s right about that shift in who gets to be a journalist.

By one estimate, in 1968, barely 10% of British journalists were graduates.⁵ In 2013, the National Council for the Training of Journalists found that 82% of journalists had a degree.⁶ At senior levels, graduates are even more dominant. In 1986, the Sutton Trust found that 20% of a sample of 100 senior journalists had not attended university. By 2015, that had fallen to just 12%. Editors, who decide what gets covered and what does not, are now overwhelmingly people who went to university, and largely top-tier universities at that.⁷ The transformation of journalism, something so important to the way we describe and discuss ourselves as a country, from a non-graduate to an almost all-graduate occupation akin to many of the high-status, high-wage professions such as law, medicine and finance, is hugely important yet under-analysed.

That last 20 years Gallagher was describing largely covered my full-time career in journalism, which started at the *Scotsman* and *Edinburgh Evening News* shortly before Tony Blair became Prime Minister. The first newsrooms I worked in were diverse places, at least in terms of journalists’ education and backgrounds. (The same journalists were largely male and almost all white, but that aspect of diversity in journalism is beyond my scope here.) While younger staff were mostly, like me, university graduates, a degree was seen as neither a requirement nor the norm. Many of my older colleagues had taken other paths into papers; at an age when I’d been sleeping through lectures on political theory, the first new editor I worked for had been Royal Marine Commando fighting in the Falklands.

By the time I left the *Telegraph* newsroom for the last time in 2017, the overwhelming majority of colleagues banging on desks to see me off were graduates. While the paper, and several others, had (re)established a serious apprenticeship scheme to hire and train people who might not have gone through HE, the norm was firmly established that journalism was done by people who had been to university.

And personal experience counts. More and more journalists followed that path of A-levels-then-university. It’s human nature to assume that our experience is the norm, the default. It’s people who don’t look or act like us who are different, not us. To a lot of journalists, FE is the other bit of education, and FE students are other people.

Simplicity is a factor too, of course. An old journalist colleague likes to semi-jokingly describe the work of journalist thus: “First we simplify, then we exaggerate”. Describing in simple terms schools and universities and the qualifications they deal with is easy compared to capturing the nature of FE. Multiple types of provider offering literally hundreds of different sorts of course and qualification in different formats and settings; and that’s before you get to the intricacies of apprenticeships and adult education. FE is complicated, and complicated is harder to report than simple.

Big news in the regions

Place matters too. The other defining feature of those newsrooms I grew up in was journalists’ connection to the places they’d worked. The trade that didn’t ask for a degree had instead educated its staff by progress through local and regional titles. It was common for staff on a bigger title such as the *Scotsman* – and even more so, London-based

nationals – to have started out on smaller publications elsewhere, getting to know a city or town or even a collection of villages. And if you know a town, you know how the FE college is part of that town, that community and economy. Of course, that varies from place to place, and the same can be true of a university’s role in a community.

But not everywhere has a university. A lot of journalists are starting to pay attention to Hartlepool, where there will soon be an important by-election. Some might know why the local paper writes more about FE than national newspapers do: Hartlepool doesn’t have a university, but it does have an excellent FE college occupying an important place in the life of the town and its people. (The principal, Darren Hankey, is an eloquent spokesman for his college, his sector and his town, incidentally, and deserves the sort of national profile and platform routinely afforded to HE leaders. But the under-representation of FE leaders in public life is another subject that will have to wait for another day.)

And just as journalism shifted towards all-graduate recruitment, so that regional dimension of newspapers faded. Local and regional titles have withered and died as habits change and ad revenues go online. The consequences of that are huge, but the relevant one here is that more and more national news journalists start their career on the national stage, without spending time reporting from “the provinces”. The result is London newsrooms full of graduates who live among other graduates in a city that absorbs huge numbers of the university educated – six months after graduating, a quarter of all graduates of English universities who are in work are working in London.⁸

What I’ve described above – commercial imperatives, personnel changes – are the building blocks of a media culture that often simply cannot see FE or its role in the life of the country.

The politics of ignoring half the country

This is part of a wider oversight, the failure to recognise the way that educational attainment and experience are increasingly important elements of political analysis, often more useful than the traditional divisions of social class or ideology that still define a lot of media debate. A person’s age and education are increasingly a better indicator of their voting intentions than their class or position on an imagined left-right spectrum^{vi}.

This was especially true for the EU referendum in 2016, when graduates split 3:1 for Remain, while people with lower-level qualifications favoured Leave. It would be hyperbolic to suggest that Britain voted for Brexit because our national media-political conversation prioritises HE over other educational routes, and excludes people who follow those other routes. But it would be equally unwise to rule out the educational skew in our national conversation having any role in the feelings of disaffection with and alienation from the political process that appear to have motivated some Leave voters.

That referendum result surprised a lot of journalists, me included. It shouldn’t have done, but the things that make journalism overlook FE are closely related to – and may overlap with – the things that made that result a surprise. It’s not hard to look at the 2019 general election result, and at the current state of (English) public opinion as shown in opinion polls, and wonder if those two overlapping blindspots are still in place today. Reflecting on the issues I’ve discussed here, on the 2016 result and politics since then, I am amazed that in all the countless words written and spoken about “levelling up” and the “Red Wall”,

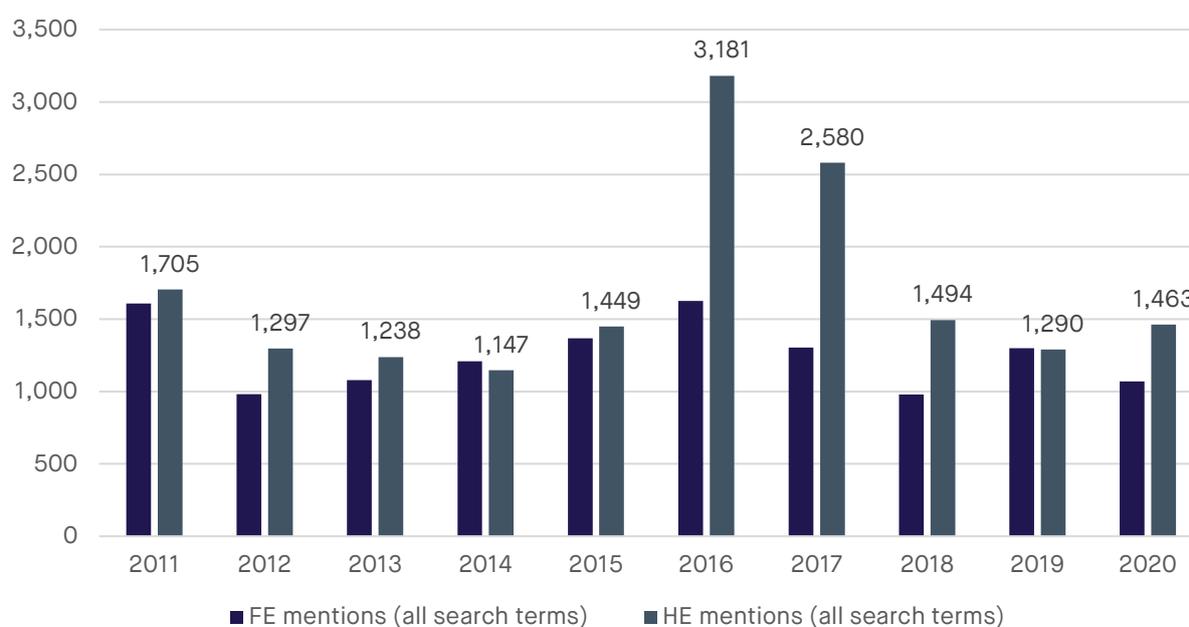
^{vi} For more on this see, for instance, *Brexitland* by Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford of Manchester University.

there is almost no attention given to skills and wages and the FE providers who play such a large part in the educational and working lives of some of the people who live in those “left-behind” places.

But then, our national conversation is largely shaped by people who did what I did: go from school to a university away from the place where we grew up, then move on to London to live and work among others who did the same. That journey still shapes too much discourse around “social mobility”, which is too often conflated with geographical mobility. Because People Like Us climbed the socio-economic ladder (or, more likely, matched our parents’ level on that scale) by moving away from home, it’s often assumed that the only way to better yourself is to make that journey away from home to a university somewhere else. Too often overlooked is the idea that a person can be socially mobile without leaving their home town or region. FE can be vital to that sort of mobility, but FE is too often something for the people and places that we left behind when we made the journey to that political village at Westminster.

And the village does not talk about FE. With one exception, 2019, the year of Augar, parliamentary records show that MPs and peers speak about HE more than about FE.

Figure 3: Parliamentary mentions related to FE and HE, in Hansard



Source: Hansard

Of course, parliamentarians’ interests are not determined by the media, but I don’t think it’s unreasonable to suggest that relative levels of media coverage help politicians to decide the importance they assign to issues. I also know from long experience that the chance of getting media coverage can influence whether some (but not all) politicians will speak about something. And a politician hoping for the attention of the national media would rightly conclude that talking about FE is not the way to get it.

Snappy payoff line here please

What gets written about gets talked about and what gets talked about gets funded and scrutinised and analysed and improved. What doesn't get covered doesn't get money or attention. FE and the people who do FE don't get the attention of the national media, which makes it less likely that politicians will pay attention to FE or its people. What happens when significant parts of a country feel ignored and excluded?

This report isn't an attack on "the media", or even on parts of it – not least because condemnation from me would be more than a little hypocritical, since I spent years participating in the neglect I describe here. Instead, this an affectionate nudge from a critical friend, an attempt to draw attention to a problem that journalism can and should fix. The worst thing journalists can do is miss the story, and FE is a story that's being missed.

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-18-review-of-education-and-funding-independent-panel-report>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7TGjDDdtv4>

³ LexisNexis search of the following titles: *Aberdeen Evening Express*; *Aberdeen Press and Journal*; *Birmingham Evening Mail*; *Birmingham Post*; *Bristol Post*; *Coventry Evening Telegraph*; *Daily Post (North Wales)*; *Daily Record and Sunday Mail*; *Derby Telegraph*; *East Anglian Daily Times*; *Eastern Daily Press*; *Evening Chronicle (Newcastle)*; *Evening Gazette*; *Evening Times (Glasgow)*; *Financial Times (London)*; *Future News - Media Planner*; *Gloucestershire Echo*; *Grimsby Telegraph*; *Hartlepool Mail*; *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*; *Hull Daily Mail*; *i - Independent Print Ltd*; *Leicester Mercury*; *Liverpool Echo*; *MailOnline*; *Manchester Evening News*; *Metro*; *Nottingham Post*; *Paisley Daily Express*; *Scotsman*; *Scottish Daily Mail*; *South Wales Echo*; *South Wales Evening Post*; *standard.co.uk*; *Stoke The Sentinel*; *TES*; *The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday (London)*; *The Daily Telegraph (London)*; *The Evening Standard (London)*; *The Express*; *The Guardian (London)*; *The Herald (Glasgow)*; *The Independent (United Kingdom)*; *The Mirror (The Daily Mirror and The Sunday Mirror)*; *The National (Scotland)*; *The Northern Echo (Newsquest Regional Press)*; *The Observer (London)*; *The Plymouth Herald*; *The Star (Sheffield)*; *The Sun (England)*; *The Sunday Telegraph (London)*; *The Sunday Times (London)*; *The Times (London)*; *The Western Mail*; *thetimes.co.uk*; *Times Higher Education*; *Western Daily Press*; *Western Morning News*; *York Press*; *Yorkshire Post*.

⁴ <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/sun-editor-tony-gallagher-brexite-journalism-trade-not-profession-and-how-bbc-never-breaks-stories>

⁵ Boyd-Barrett, Oliver (1970) 'Journalism Recruitment and Training: Problems in Professionalization' in Jeremy Tunstall (ed) *Media Sociology: A Reader*. London: Constable, cited in https://shura.shu.ac.uk/10803/3/Canter_Chasing_the_accreditation_dream%5B1%5D.pdf.

⁶ https://www.nctj.com/downloadlibrary/jaw_final_higher_2.pdf

⁷ https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Leading-People_Feb16.pdf

⁸ https://www.smf.co.uk/commentary_podcasts/ask-expert-dr-maria-abreu/