

SIR - Liz Lightfoot deserves only B minus for her otherwise-excellent "Blair School Report" (December 1).

This is because Ms Lightfoot marks the Prime Minister on all the principal education issues except one. Nowhere does Ms Lightfoot mention Further Education, in which Mr Blair's record is not so much woeful as largely blank.

Further Education, including work-based learning, apprenticeships and life-long learning, is the engine room of education and training. Many more people of all ages are in FE than in Higher Education. And for increasing numbers of them, FE is a way into HE. Increasingly, Higher Education is delivered in Further Education.

FE, enlightened employers agree, is vital to the competitiveness of British industry and commerce. Many such employers are members of the National Forum of Engineering Centres (NFEC), as are specialist schools, training associations, private training companies and FE colleges.

Only six years into his premiership has Mr "Education, Education, Education" shown any knowledge of, let alone interest in, FE.

The Foster Report, published two years ago, stresses the vital importance of FE to the British economy. This was the first sign that Mr Blair and his government have the least glimmerings of a strategic vision for FE. How little, how late, will be done about the forthcoming Leitch report on the skills needed by 2020?

Meanwhile, spending on FE bureaucracy is at an all-time high.

The post-16 education and training sector is awash with organisations and quangos that compete, and duplicate each other's work. As a result, hard-working and in many cases badly-disadvantaged FE students are being short-changed. FE teachers' efforts are constantly diverted from teaching into adapting to the latest of the constant changes in the structure of qualifications. No one qualification seems to last for more than two years before it is amended or superseded.

This might not be so bad if there were enough FE teachers and trainers to keep up with demand and do right by students. But capacity is already stretched, and the best efforts of lecturers and of learners will soon be crippled by the fact that more lecturers are retiring than are being recruited.

For many thousands of people, FE is the gateway to a more productive and fulfilled life. The same used to be said of teaching FE, but due to Mr Blair's lack of strategic vision, low pay and departmental closures drive out FE teachers.

A NFEC school report on the Prime Minister would read "Late starter: much ground to make up".



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