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# **CROSSING BOUNDARIES 2: THE FE SECTOR AND PERMEABLE SPACES**

**A review of recent FETL-funded  
projects and think pieces**

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**PAUL GRAINGER**  
(UCL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION)

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# ABOUT FETL

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**The Further Education Trust for Leadership's vision is of a further education sector that is valued and respected for:**

- Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers;
- Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
- Sharing fresh ideas generously and informing practice with knowledge.

# THE AUTHORS

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**Paul Grainger** is Co-director of the Centre for Education and Work and Head of Innovation and Enterprise for the Department of Education, Practice and Society at University College London. Previously, he was principal of a college in Liverpool. Originally a historian, he has worked in vocational education, as a teacher, inspector or manager, for most of his career, preferring the complex and composite nature of vocational learning. In the 1990s, he chaired a RIBA committee looking at college design to promote learning environments. His present research concerns systems leadership, the complexities of regional training, skills and employment patterns, the potential impact of the fourth industrial revolution and transitions from education to work. He is a member of the G20 Task Force on The Future of Work.

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# FOREWORD

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## **Dame Ruth Silver**

The first volume of Crossing Boundaries was commissioned by the Further Education Trust for Leadership in 2017 to provide a review and analysis of FETL's published work to date. Paul Grainger produced a very clear and stimulating report that both demonstrated the wide range of activities which FETL had supported and highlighted some promising areas for development. Two years on, we approached Paul to reflect again on the work carried out by FETL and its partners against the wider context of changes in the wider further education community. And, once again, Paul has delivered a fascinating, highly readable review that makes intelligent sense of the main themes of our work and their relationship to the sector.

The common title shared by the two reports reflects both a key theme of our work, picked out in Paul's original report and developed again here, and the nature of leadership in a sector with 'permeable' boundaries and diverse stakeholders. The willingness to move between disciplines and challenge and transcend boundaries remains pivotal to FETL's work, and is reflected in very many of the projects which we have funded or in which we have participated. It is also a growing dimension of the work of FE leaders, reflected in new thinking about place and the role of colleges in contributing to the 'narrative of their localities'.

The notion of colleges as anchors in their spaces has been a thread running through many of the projects we have supported, and it is good to see this notion being taken up

more and more widely and creatively, to the point where it now has some purchase among senior politicians. Of course, this way of thinking of colleges, as, essentially, key players in a complex local ecosystem, has implications for leadership, which are deftly described here. While much of our work has concerned the fostering of a culture of learning and thinking among leaders; another has been the need to create conditions within the system that are conducive to such leadership. Too often, leaders' aspirations and capacity to lead have been stifled by our oppressive, over-regulated culture, the turbulent policy environment and the damage caused by some quite savage reductions in funding over the past decade.

Honesty about the challenges we face is as important as having a clear vision of where we want to get to. One of the things that is pleasing particularly about the work we have funded over the past two years is that it has managed to do both, looking forward with boldness and fresh insight, but grounding this new thinking in the realities of the very challenging world we inhabit. FETL will continue to strengthen the leadership of thinking in further education and skills, both through the new work we are helping develop and the effective dissemination of the work we have already produced. The current report contributes to this, by drawing out the key themes of our projects and placing them in a wider context of ideas and practice. After all, the value of the ideas described here lies only in the life they have off the page, in the new ideas and learning they stimulate and support. We believe they are useful in our world.

*Dame Ruth Silver is President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership*

# BACKGROUND

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In recent years the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) has commissioned a series of publications that focus on the leadership of the further education (FE) sector: a sector which is vital for developing both the skills for future economic and civic participation and the social mobility required to promote a society capable of sustaining that participation.

In 2017, FETL published *Crossing Boundaries*,<sup>1</sup> a survey of FETL publications up to that time. It observed, in the sector:

*that leadership permeates the organisational boundary to interact with the wider system within which the institution finds itself. But in FE this is accentuated by the significant role of colleges in three crucial areas: meeting young people's demands for education and training; meeting employers' requirements for skills and work readiness; and meeting policymakers' aspirations for social integration.*

The many demands made on it mean that the role of the college leader can be daunting:

*Leaders in further education have to understand the nature of complex learning, of vocational pedagogies, of the economic climate in which skills needs are identified, and of the micro-political and policy world which balances funding against employer needs and student demand. To be effective, this requires boundary-crossing practices.<sup>2</sup>*

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1 Grainger, P. 2017. *Crossing Boundaries*. FETL

2 Ibid.

Since then, FETL has commissioned further studies of leadership in FE which elaborate on the ground-breaking work already contained within the FETL archive. These studies can be seen to address the triangulated areas for enquiry: the drivers for system change; the responses of the policy community, governance and employers; and the frequent triumph over adversity of the leadership in the sector. These subsequent studies are the focus of this review. They confirm the complex nature of the sector, and the role of leaders in working transversally through collective leadership and collaborative stakeholder relationships and across established boundaries, to act as anchors in local skills and economic ecosystems.

However, there is a sense of change coming through these recent studies. There is a range of drivers and responses, but the general impression is that colleges are generating a new 'spatial' sense. The complexity of the sector's mission has brought about a set of inter-related iterations that is enabling colleges to move with growing confidence through a number of related permeable spaces.

Needless to say, in terms of central policy, the sector continues to undergo a process of flux: it was ever thus. This is a time of renewed policy volatility. Of course, some variations are necessary in a world where the impulse to change is escalating, urgently, seeking solutions to 'wicked problems' that threaten the survival of human structures. The UK is, in its unhurried way, doing its bit. There are concerns, at policy level, about the potential impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4thIR),<sup>3</sup> artificial intelligence and the future of work. There is rhetoric around a desire to equip society with the skills that will be required to make good use of what the future brings. But this has not yet worked through to the FE sector. Policy dogma at present remains obsessed with the need for 'efficiencies' and the quest for cuts. The result is a lack of a coherent strategy for technical and vocational education and training (TVET), combined with a day-to-day twiddling of

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3 Fourth Industrial Revolution and the role of education examined: Education Committee of Inquiry, 2018



funding and qualifications amidst the continuing deep-seated misunderstanding of the nature of FE, and especially of technical colleges. The research included in this review includes detailed assessments of the harm being done to the sector.

However, the logic of a college's role in the configuration of the UK economy continues to play out. Colleges are crucial to the maintenance and development of both city and region. They are adapting not just negatively to a policy volatility, but also positively as they become anchors in the skills economy, and as they help develop the narrative of their locality. Colleges are both major agents of social mobility and providers of high-level skills. Globally, there is growing agreement that to respond to the future, actions need to be local. Devolution is a driver as localities become more assertive. Colleges are a part of this process as they continue to permeate the spaces in which they are situated.

Many of the pieces reviewed here focus on devolution, the recreation of local political, civic and economic space, as an important driver for FE. Some of these have examined issues concerned with the wider system, or the ecology in which colleges have to operate. This includes both the expansive systems of economic activity, social inclusion, progression and access to work, together with the regulatory systems of funding regimes, inspection and qualifications. Much of what has been written has to do with the tensions between these.



# DRIVERS FOR SYSTEM CHANGE

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The most substantial survey of the FE context for the near future, and the one that covers most ground, is *Going Places Innovation in Further Education and Skills* (2017). This is a report by the Skills Commission, co-chaired by Dame Ruth Silver and Barry Sheerman. Neil Bates led this inquiry.

The report contains a large-scale review of the inspiring innovation and leadership taking place in further education and skills across the UK. It examines how the present policy landscape might be usefully developed to provide a coherent and sensible platform for the development of suitable skills. It notes with approval that in a changing policy landscape the further education and skills sector has always been responsive. The report aims to *highlight the best and make recommendations that would enable the best to become very best*, looking forward to a period of *transformative change*. It describes the cumulative systems impact of the Apprenticeship Levy, Area Based Reviews, skills devolution and the Post-16 Skills Plan.<sup>4</sup> It makes a case that, cumulatively, these will have more potential for change than the incorporation of colleges in 1992. Emerging partnerships and alignments are identified together with a more systematic approach to skills developments in order to support regional economies and dynamic labour markets within a digital future.

The report seeks to develop an understanding of how innovation might best serve the needs of immediate stakeholders. It then looks towards a wider sectoral maturity, underpinned by developments in technology and, finally, at how the sector may thereby integrate wider economic and social developments with

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4 BIS/DfE. July 2016

a locality or space. It makes a total of 17 recommendations, drawing extensively for supporting material on the devolved countries of the UK and on Manchester as an exemplar for city region devolution within England.

The first chapter deals with the complexity of college spaces. It describes how to simultaneously serve learners, local employers and regional economies. It calls for greater flexibility and fit around the needs of learners and employers. This, of course, would be a significant departure from the funding/qualification gridlock of the present. Colleges should develop as hubs and incubators, which can drive change and thus be more closely aligned with present policy developments. Devolution is seen as a key element. What is needed is more local collaboration, underpinned by devolved funding and self-determination. This, the report says, with an eye on those successful examples of devolution, should 'be based on an area's capability and ambition, not solely on population density or the number of large businesses'. This is an excellent delineation of the nature of permeable space that colleges are beginning to shape.

The second chapter, 'Delivering higher level skills and improved employment outcomes in a changing labour market', looks for a radical diversification of governance, enhanced employer engagement and increased industrial/commercial experience for staff. These ideas are certainly in the wind at the moment, perhaps more in aspiration than reality. The report calls for better-informed planning. It also calls for improved labour market and business intelligence to inform skills projections, better data sets across 16–24-year olds, and for a careers service that is mandatory in schools, and which should be 'based on attainable employment opportunities. This should mean that it is grounded in local and national skills needs'. This would be supported by clear pathways and end destinations, but with clearly identified transferable skills at local, regional and national levels.

The third chapter speculates on preparation for the digital world. It recommends that investment should be made, not

only in machines but also in the capabilities of staff to deal with this digital world and in establishing collaborations with other providers. Such collaborations should have the confidence to experiment and innovate, and this should be supported by the inspection regime.

The fourth chapter concludes with proposals for creating sustainable institutions and a thriving system. It suggests that the emphasis on collaboration or merger should move away from structural or organisational change and be more based on the needs of learners and employers: a cultural, not a physical, change, adapting to local spaces. The report suggests greater income diversification, more commercial engagement and more variety in business models, including a capacity to invest for the future. Further, and in contrast to the botched Area Review process, which excluded school sixth forms and independent training providers from its remit, 'all parts of the education and skills landscape must be considered in any future geographical review of provision'.

Productivity, inevitably, is a concern of an inquiry such as this. In seeking a solution, it challenges certain paradigms. For example, the inquiry focuses on small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which dominate the economy, rather than just on large employers. Training need not be about long-term courses, rather short, focused provision in a variety of locations and media, and related to the physical context of employment. Such vestigial paradigms should disappear, as colleges embrace innovation, and integrate closely with economic activity.

In *Rising to the challenge: The further education and skills sector over the next decade* (Keohane, The Social Market Foundation, 2017), Nigel Keohane speculates on how present developments will impact on the further education and skills system. This leads to some insightful speculation as to how the system may look in 10 years' time.

The report makes clear 'that FE and skills has reached a point in its development where some variation of the status quo is no

longer an option and, while the challenges of today are real and should not be understated, we must engage with them through a long lens, thinking five, 10, even 20 years ahead’.

Dame Ruth Silver notes in her foreword that the report considers what role FE and skills will have in wider system-level change.

The report’s starting point is the huge financial strain affecting the sector, and constant policy instability. It notes that falling funding levels have contributed to concerns about the financial sustainability of some institutions, drawing on a report by the Public Accounts Committee in December 2015 that highlighted the declining financial health of many colleges and warned of potentially detrimental consequences for learners and local economies. In addition, the report notes a suite of policy changes and levers to constrain colleges. Area Based Reviews<sup>5</sup> are seen as part of a much wider process of policy changes, which include the structure of courses and qualifications, a focus on performance in English and maths, the Apprenticeship Levy, localised funding and loans for learners. There are concerns that the Department for Education has taken over responsibility for all post-16 provision: apprenticeships, post-19 FE, and HE teaching policy.

Set within this background of ‘policy hostility’, Keohane sees competition not only within, but between sectors intensifying. In particular, he refers to competition between further and higher education. This is a common preoccupation at present across much of the contemporary literature on the FE sector and will be picked up again in this review. Universities have been challenged by a steady demographic decline since 2009 and, at the time of writing, the issue of Brexit has not been resolved and the nature of future recruitment of overseas students remains unclear. Cracks are appearing in the university settlement, with high numbers of unconditional offers from some institutions driving a deflation of entry criteria. Hence there is a probable move by some universities into those student populations who may have, in

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5 See Spours, K., Hodgson, A., Grainger, P. and Smith, D. 2018. *Post-16 Area-Based Reviews in London: A small step towards a more universal and coherent skills system in the Capital?* London: Association of Colleges.

recent years, looked to FE. Rising to the Challenge also envisages further extension to competition with schools, some of which are taking more of an interest in skills education. This could lead to a situation whereby schools need to collaborate, but will also be in competition with colleges. Moreover, employers themselves, perhaps prompted by their participation in apprenticeship programmes and concerned to ensure a skills supply in a rapidly changing economic environment, may look to provide skills training for students who might otherwise have looked to FE. The report cites Ewart Keep who also predicts that FE may find itself squeezed between the politically dominant school and university agendas. As the Skills Plan and Industrial Policy start to have an impact and the focus on technical education grows, universities and schools will get pulled towards more technical subjects. Whether this will produce the better skills required by the UK economy is, of course, open to doubt. The report envisages schools and universities taking away potential college students, but there is no discussion as to the courses that would be offered, nor how they may gear up to provide the 'clear line of sight to work' that effective vocational education requires. The increased competition that Keohane and Keep predict may well lead to a watering down of quality and relevance. This may be why the report argues that colleges should be 'prioritising quality and out-performing other sectors'.

This report takes a different view to that of the majority of the publications reviewed here with regard to the future of regional space. While most consider that the relative success of devolution and regionalism has enhanced the perception of local place, the report argues that 'Educational technology (Edtech) will see learners self-direct'. It predicts that 'tech chains' and other technological developments will erode the importance of place. Yet, interestingly, the report, coming at a time when social mobility has stalled, foresees a future for the sector as 'Local Social Mobility Champions'. Furthermore, with an ageing population, there will be a need for the retraining of older workers, perhaps taking place in the workplace through *employer-embedded partnerships*. There is a tension between these two

projections, the one eroding, the other reinforcing, a sense of place, which could be further explored.

Keohane notes that, since incorporation in 1993, the number of FE colleges has fallen by around a quarter. This has to do, of course, with institutional arrangements rather than the closure of provision. Following this logic, he speculates that there could be yet more radical regroupings and alliances which he describes as *vertical chains, including colleges, secondary schools and primaries*. He cites the example of the Midland Academies Trust in Warwickshire, which comprises four secondary schools and is sponsored by North Warwickshire and Hinckley College.

However, the report also concludes that the emerging industrial policy will require deeper and more personalised relationships with employers, with colleges maintaining *excellent connections with local businesses*, re-orienting around their needs. There is a ring of localness to this. It will require *embedding practises of the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution'*. Advances in technology are, of course, impossible to predict in the long-term, but, projecting from contemporary developments, the report speaks of much more personalised learning, such as the better targeting of support and learning analytics, new opportunities to embed training at work, and simulated learning, all supported through improved management systems and the *innovative and efficient use of labour*. Again, there is a tension around the notion of place. Technology, it is argued, reduces reliance on physical estates and promotes access to a wider pool of consumers through distance learning. This may weaken the brand:

*Ask someone in FE and skills what is unique or distinct in their sector. The answer would likely comprise at least one of the following responses: its openness and the diversity of its student population, its curriculum and the technical learning that is undertaken and can be applied, its connections to the local area and relevance to employment and local employers. The question posed by the analysis above is: which of these could and should be special characteristics 10 years from now?*



The conclusion is that *for colleges, local connections and 'place' are set to be undermined by technological opportunities*

On the other hand, however, the report points to factors that may reinforce a sense of place:

*The second, dramatic part of the story is the huge range of potential partners that could coalesce over the next ten years. The emerging influence of City Mayors, Growth Deals, City Deals and Devolution Deals may re-cast the nature of local leadership and collaboration.*

Perhaps technology might take us to a national college. Yet, perhaps, locally there may develop vertical chains as single campus entities or federal alliances. Colleges may become collaborators in workforce development, discovering and adapting to new learners and increasing provision for older lifelong learners.

*Rising to the Challenge* does not give us a single vision, nor a coherent account of place. That was not its purpose. It is an intensely researched review which asks some challenging questions and identifies potential tensions in the near future. It provides a framework for the examination of the developing notion of space.

In contrast, *Cities of Learning in the UK* (Anthony Painter and Atif Shafique, RSA, 2017) provides a clear vision. This RSA prospectus looks in detail at a movement that started in the USA in 2013. It is useful to consider how well such innovations transfer between administrations and cultures, particularly in the complex world of TVET, for which there are not, as yet, established international norms.<sup>6</sup> This is a supportive piece which presents the cities of learning approach with an admirable mix of clarity and enthusiasm, illustrated in a manner which is clearly aimed at an audience of similar advocates. The prospectus moves between structure, content and benefit in a relaxed manner supported by snappy statistics.

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6 See <https://t20japan.org/policy-brief-rethinking-pathways-to-employment/>

Cities of learning (CofL) is presented as a new approach to activating a grassroots, city-based, mass-engagement movement around learning and skills. As such, it is an admirable contribution to the consideration of learning space. It asserts that *we need a much greater focus on socially inclusive lifelong learning*, which can be supported through technology. We are told *it brings together learners, learning, work and civic institutions (schools, colleges, employers, training providers, charities, local authorities, libraries, museums, coding clubs, makerspaces and so on)*:

*These networks are supported by a digital platform that facilitates the recognition of informal learning and connects learners to a wealth of enrichment experiences and opportunities through digital open badges.*

Painter and Shafique expand, helpfully, on the context of growing social inequality. Sometimes the language is influenced by the origins of the movement, a fusion of technological and American jargon. Digital open badges, for example, are a practice/brand more widely used in the US than the UK. In a similar way, it is not always clear which administration we are in. For example, when introducing the notion of *persistent challenges*, the first of four types of challenge are described as those that: *we have failed to address despite significant state investment*. Surely this refers to US states? What would be the UK equivalent? However, it is clearly the case that across the societies of the US and UK there remain persistent challenges – attainment gaps; inequality of opportunity and what is described as the *chronic lack of upwards mobility*. The piece dwells on *entrenched social and regional inequalities that limit the life chances of disadvantaged individuals and places*. CofL is promoted as a potential way to begin to challenge these inequalities.

The prospectus identifies four further areas of challenge.

*Escalating challenges*, resulting from major social, economic and technological trends, including *rising economic insecurity*.

*Unequal access to the fruits of technology, the growing value of core skills as well as their unequal distribution; and the rising costs associated with health inequalities and demographic change.*

*Future challenges, relating to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which will have major implications for society, work and the way we govern and deliver public services. This includes the potential impact of automation and artificial intelligence on how we study, train, work and live our lives.*

*System challenges which are those that constrain the innovative capacity of policy and collective action. This includes issues such as the fragmented, rigid and centralised nature of public services (US, UK, both?)*

In response to these, the prospectus proposes that *socially inclusive lifelong learning should be at the heart of how we respond to these challenges*. It is widely accepted that *as technological and structural economic change takes shape, non-cognitive skills (such as confidence, motivation and communication) will become more critical*<sup>7</sup>.

This is very much in tune with the thinking around the 4thIR, as repetitive tasks are automated, and more complex forms of working are created. CofL is a strategy to develop these skills. Its approach is consistent with the developing policy aspiration in the UK. CofL seeks to establish collaborative and place-based solutions that can be linked to achieving *inclusive economic growth, better-quality work and greater civic action and social belonging*. Interestingly, the piece states that place is often where barriers exist. It identifies the political and civic leadership skills necessary to overcome or permeate such barriers, as demonstrated by Mayor Rahm Emmanuel, who led the development of the CofL movement in Chicago. UK examples

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Barber. 2017. *Possibility Thinking: Creative conversations on the future of FE and skills*, p. 67. RSA

are drawn from Brighton, Rochdale and Plymouth. In common with many of the studies reviewed here, the authors identify that having local anchor organisations, as key coordinators, is one of the necessary drivers of success.

The leadership skills required to overcome the barriers to successful implementation of project are described as championing, validating, influencing, embedding and troubleshooting, while a *skills spine* is a *foundational component*. Few could argue with this list of important leadership skills. It's a lively prospectus, full of enthusiasm and, in its promotion of lifelong learning within a definable space, a worthy aim.

Equipping Scotland for the future key challenges for the Scottish skills system (Russell Gunson and Rachael Thomas, IPPR Scotland, 2017)

This report is a useful and welcome contribution to the growing literature on the impact of devolution on learning systems across the UK.<sup>8</sup> As Gunson and Thomas point out, *developing a skills system that meets the needs of an ever-changing labour market is one of the biggest issues facing the Scottish Government over the coming years*. They identify the main short-term economic challenges as productivity, progression and pay. These are holding back growth. In the longer term, they foresee *that technological and demographic changes will alter our economy and society, and will mean people will work longer, in multiple careers and for multiple employers*. The skills system will thus need to develop to accommodate these 4thIR scenarios.

This, of course, is entirely apposite to the Scottish context, but could equally apply across all four nations of the UK, Europe or, indeed, the nations of the G20. However, having set the context, the authors focus on substantial policy issues in Scotland as they have emerged over the past few years. These have included a *move towards regionalisation, most notably in the college sector*,

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<sup>8</sup> See Hodgson, A., Spours, K., Waring, M., Gallacher, J., Irwin, T. and James, D. 2018. *FE and skills across the four countries of the UK: New opportunities for policy learning*.

*the introduction of outcome agreements for further and higher education provision, a focus on full-time, recognised qualifications across the system and an emphasis on young people.*

They identify 10 key challenges:

- funding skills
- inclusive growth
- pace of change
- building high skill business models
- upskilling
- globalisation
- Brexit and migration
- demographic change
- multiple careers
- technological advances and automation.

These are global concerns, but again the authors identify specific issues in Scotland: an ageing population; the effect of a move away from heavy industry and oil is more acutely felt in the region; and fiscal restraint in the public sector. There is a specific and detailed discussion around the likely impact of Brexit, and of possible Independence, both of which issues have yet to be resolved at the time of writing.

The Scottish Government has undertaken extensive structural reform within the skills system, including, importantly, college regionalisation. This has been a significant development, which has had the effect of promoting a better understanding of economic-skills systems and the role of colleges as anchor institutions within their economic region. Scotland is perceived as being supportive of the skills system; having invested in apprenticeships, its colleges and in its universities. It is also investing in its learners and continues to pay student tuition fees.

This strategy is a response to the specific context of a significant downturn in employment following the 2008 financial crash. There has been some recovery in Scotland, but less so than for the UK as a whole. Before 2008, its employment rate had been higher, and thus the impact of the downturn has been accentuated. Significantly, the youth employment rate has been high relative to the UK in general and remains so. There is also a system-wide problem in generally poor levels of pay. The report identifies career progression, that is, the proportion of working people moving from low-skilled jobs to mid- or high-skill jobs, as being lower in Scotland than in the UK as a whole.

One response has been the college regionalisation process, which has resulted in a series of college mergers reducing the number of colleges from 42 to 26. In addition, there has been a switch in parts of the skills system, towards a greater focus on outcome funding rather than simply input funding. Nevertheless, the authors caution, *input targets still pervade the sector with, for example, targets for university and college places set centrally.* Indeed, the situation, as described in this report, presents a classic struggle between 'regionalisation', which has been much trumpeted, and the continuing pull of centralisation. The report examines the impact of the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act, which has, since 2014, reclassified colleges in Scotland as public bodies. The effect of this is that, while previously colleges were, in a legal sense, independent of government, they have now lost some freedoms such as no longer being able to hold reserves. This could be significant. For those running colleges at the time of 1993 incorporation, the ability to hold reserves and to plan for long-term investment, was seen as being a significant aspect of the new autonomy that colleges had achieved. Nevertheless, it is clear that in Scotland, by integrating on a regional basis, with political and civic leaders, colleges have been able to recover some of their self-determination, operating within their spaces to make substantial investments, as, for example, is demonstrated by the City of Glasgow College's ambitious building programme. Some further exploration of this tension between centralising and regionalising decision-making would be of interest.

The report describes long-term changes in FE provision in Scotland. The number of part-time learners has been in decline for the past 10 years or so; a phenomenon common to the UK. More pertinent to the Scottish context is the finding that there has been a decline in the number of non-recognised qualifications being taught in colleges. This is a thorny problem for all administrations: qualifications provide a level of confidence for policymakers and governance in terms of monitoring performance but can become less relevant to employment needs or become atrophied and out-of-kilter with contemporary employment practices. The updating, or replacement, of qualifications is generally slowed down by the need for careful design and further delayed by validating systems. For an economy needing to reinvent itself, a more flexible, responsive system might be of greater value. The authors indicate this when, towards the end of the report, they state: *The current labour market demand for skills is not well matched to the supply of skills in terms of qualifiers from the skills system, and in 2014, there was a large gap between demand for mid-level skill, sub-degree entry-level vacancies and supply of sub-degree qualifiers.*

It is to be hoped that the process of regionalisation will go some way towards solving this discrepancy between the demands of a regenerating economy and the supply of skills from the FE and HE providers.

The report examines in detail Scotland's Economic Strategy (2015), which set out an approach to sustainable economic growth through increased competitiveness and tackling inequality. A major plank of this strategy is the *Fair Work Convention* (2016), which has five dimensions:

- providing employees with an effective voice
- ensuring opportunity to access and progress in work
- guaranteeing security of employment, work and income
- recognising the importance of workplace fulfilment
- ensuring people are respected and treated respectfully, whatever their role and status.

This is a strongly inclusive approach. The sub-text seeks to align potential employees with existing vacancies, or those that will shortly come about through the retirement of an ageing workforce. This is in anticipation of what is described as *greater levels of economic and technological disruption*, and an assumption that people in Scotland will be *working for longer, working in multiple careers, in multiple sectors and for multiple employers, resulting in their having a greater ongoing need for skills throughout their working lives*.

From their research, the authors arrive at five important recommendations:

- embedding an outcome approach and setting a clear national purpose
- regional integration of the skills system
- clarifying roles of learning routes within the skills system
- learners and employers co-designing a responsive skills system
- improving flexibility of learning
- increasing transferability of learning

The implementation of these would provide a strong framework for establishing a socially inclusive, regionally based skills ecosystem which would go a long way towards addressing the key challenges identified at the start of the paper.

*The skills system in Northern Ireland: Challenges and opportunities* (Russell Gunson, Chris Murray, Ian Williamson, IPPR, 2018). This report forms part of a forthcoming *A 21st century skills system, a cross-country comparison between Scotland and Northern Ireland*, being prepared by the Institute for Public Policy Research. As the outline provided by FETL states: *Scotland and Northern Ireland share many characteristics. Both have skills systems that have undergone significant change in recent years, with college mergers and funding pressures.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <https://fetl.org.uk/project/a-21st-century-skills-system-a-cross-country-comparison-between-scotland-and-northern-ireland>. Accessed April 2019



The report itself is quite clear in its approach: *The skills system will be crucial to meeting the challenges and changes facing Northern Ireland in the coming years.*

This encapsulates the challenges, as with *Equipping Scotland (above)*, of both trends and developments that are largely applicable to advanced economies internationally which require an intelligent response in order to achieve future prosperity and to identify matters and trends which are largely specific to a particular region.

The authors identify the need for inclusive growth to create both economic and social justice as vital to the future success of the Northern Ireland (NI) economy. The past years of conflict and the continuing legacy of civic and political problems,<sup>10</sup> and associated social disruption, continue to have a defining role in NI. This makes inclusion and growth an urgent aspiration. One aspect of the policy response in recent years has been a series of reforms and strategies designed to meet the demand for skills. The authors are of the firm opinion that the central concern with regard to the skills issue in Northern Ireland is the provision of post-school, sub-degree level skills, i.e. those at levels 4 and 5. As with Scotland, there has been a coordinated merger of colleges to create regional hubs. This has been accompanied by the introduction of an Apprenticeship Levy, the development of Higher-Level Apprenticeships and the innovative Assured Skills scheme. Refreshingly, at a policy level, FE is clearly seen as crucial to the drive to raise the level of skills, and the authors note the inclusion of colleges within the innovation strategies proposed.

The report notes that:

*The skills system does not operate in isolation, and a number of external factors will determine how effective skills policy is over the coming years. Automation and technological change, Brexit, the changing nature of globalisation and future funding challenges across the*

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<sup>10</sup> At the time of writing, Northern Ireland remains without a devolved Assembly

*UK will have direct and indirect influence over Northern Ireland's future.*

Northern Ireland is a complex space, with a number of barriers operating within it, some global, but other highly specific to the location and history. Continuing doubt over Brexit and consequently the nature of the border with Ireland, and with the rest of the UK, remains unsolved at the time of writing. The report goes on to identify further issues which are distinctive to Northern Ireland's 'troubles' and the resulting political, civic and economic dislocation. This includes a legacy of low pay, a lack of suitable progression routes, a long-standing, underlying cause of the social unrest. However, the authors note one highly positive indication of progress in that employment rates between Catholics and Protestants have now drawn level. The authors conclude that:

*Political instability is hindering the skills system's ability to adapt and anticipate change, but there is a role for the leadership of employers, learners, third sector and trade unions through social partnership to drive a new skills agenda.*

The role of college leaders could, surely, be added to the list. But the point is well made: collaboration of a range of leaders within a given space is the way forward for growing economic prosperity.

The report also sees the necessity of mid-career learning, as an appropriate response to the need for Northern Ireland to change its economic structures, moving in common with the rest of the UK from manufacturing and heavy industry to the service sector. There is a need to raise general skills levels throughout the working population. In addition, the authors argue convincingly that it is not sufficient to consider only youth unemployment, but also to focus on improving life chances for young people that promotes both economic and civic engagement. They recommend an outcome-focused approach as has been established in Scotland. The report recommends that schools and

colleges should work together to focus on those most at risk of leaving school with no qualification.

It is perhaps significant that while many of the challenges that Northern Ireland faces are global concerns, such as technological change, automation and multiple careers. One global concern, the impact of migration is not present, perhaps because of a continuing poor overall economic performance.

In their study of the economy, admirably supported by detailed statistics, the authors point to the large numbers of small enterprises and microbusinesses. As major employers decline or leave NI, these will be the agents for economic growth. However, the private sector as a whole is small as a proportion of the economy compared with the rest of the UK. Other distinctive features are that the economy is significantly smaller per head of population than in the UK in general, with low productivity and a higher proportion the population economically inactive. A particular feature of this statistic is a higher rate of people who are registered as long-term sick. Furthermore, a low proportion of economically inactive people want a job. These are often the poorest in NI. This is interpreted as a cultural issue that economic reform alone cannot address. The civic and cultural space is more complex. Hence the report's emphasis on civic issues and life chances. The authors' careful use of labour market information reveals that figures for economic participation are roughly in line with the rest of the UK until the age of 40 to 43, when a gap of between five and seven percentage points opens up. The authors suggest persuasively that this represents a legacy of the 'Troubles' that may well be having an ongoing impact on mental health; hence an emphasis above on seeking to improve mid-life upskilling.

The detail in this report is both interesting and convincing. For example, there is a lower prevalence of zero-hours contract workers in NI than in the UK as a whole. Zero-hours contracts are generally frowned upon, but they are often found in dynamic, shifting, developing parts of the economy where employee protection has not yet become established.

The report reaches the conclusion that NI has the characteristics of a low-skills, low-pay equilibrium, whereby low levels of skills in the population appear to be matched by, and linked to, low demand for skills from employers. Employees see few opportunities for themselves and poor utilisation of skills means that workers see little benefit in increasing their skill set. As a result, firms that generate high value-added jobs are reluctant to set up or expand in this part of the UK. This is an important analysis, very much in line with the high- and low-skills ecosystems discussed elsewhere in recent publications,<sup>11</sup> and providing a valuable insight into some of the features that restrain growth in NI. There are large numbers of low-skilled workers, combined with a relatively high numbers of graduates. But across this cohort there is a poor mix of skills being supplied, with an oversupply of graduates in some fields and an undersupply of graduates in key economic fields. Teaching is given as an example of oversupply, perhaps reflecting a culture of preferring public to private employment.

The report examines the policy response, *A Programme for Government*, produced by the Northern Ireland Executive. This sets out to address the major structural issues identified above. As part of this response, just a year before the collapse of power-sharing, a further education strategy for Northern Ireland, *Further Education Means Success*, was launched (January 2016): *The vision is that further education colleges will be recognised locally, nationally and internationally for high quality and economically relevant education and training provision*, with colleges promoting social inclusion and delivering a pipeline for skills.

However, with the collapse of the power-sharing executive and, therefore, a lack of central direction, there has been a move towards more localized, sub-regional initiatives. It is interesting that FE is again seen as crucial in this process. However, across NI as a whole, the authors conclude:

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11 See, for example: Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. 2016. The evolution of social ecosystem thinking: its relevance for education, economic development and localities – stimulus paper for 22 June ecosystem workshop. Post-14 Centre for Education and Work, UCL IOE

*The failure of power-sharing has inevitably led to political stasis but, nonetheless, an evaluation and update of the strategies, as well as political decisions on their future direction, will be needed soon.*

It is likely that the six regional colleges that have been established in the province will continue to develop as important regional anchors. They are helping to define the spaces they are in, as, for example, the role of Belfast Metropolitan College in supporting the Belfast City Deal. Maybe this is devolution by default.

The Long-Term Implications of Devolution and Localism for FE in England (Ewart Keep, AoC, 2017).

In his foreword to this report into the potential far-reaching changes that may come about as a result of devolution, David Hughes, Chief Executive, Association of Colleges, states:

*Colleges are vital parts of the local education system, are major employers and do so much to support the local economy, healthy communities and social cohesion. Yet they have been pushed and pulled by national policy shifts more than any other institutions in education.*

Is it possible that this period of 'policy hostility' and neglect is coming to an end? Certainly, we have seen elsewhere in these FETL-funded reports that colleges often expand into spaces created by policy dithering. Hughes continues:

*At the same time, the policy changes do mean that there is a lot to play for. It may be that good devolution, well thought through, would bring colleges together with local leaders in a powerful force for good.*

Dame Ruth Silver, in her foreword, powerfully emphasizes the point: *life on the neglected mezzanine floor of the English education system has long been one of near-constant adaptation and reinvention.* These two forewords set the tone for this strongly-argued study of leadership and governance of the FE system in a time of wider economic and political changes.

Keep bases his argument on two conjectures. First, that there is, or at least should be, a further education system rather than just a collection of free players in a quasi-market. Second, that this system will be driven in the near future by a process of devolution and localism. For both, Keep argues, good leadership is essential.

Keep introduces the term 'metis', meaning not a classical sense of a combination of wisdom and cunning, but *localised, practice-based knowledge*. He argues that there are at present a number of opportunities for a rebalancing of power towards the local and that the term will be used as a basis *to measure the efficacy of the new policies*. *'One of the overarching questions the project has tried to explore is the degree to which devolution enables metis to be deployed in conditions of trust between central government and localities, and between local actors and stakeholders'*.

This report thus has four aims:

- a clearer picture of how localism is playing out in specific areas
- enhanced understanding of the implications of localism and the role of FE
- understanding the balance between local and national priorities
- identification of localisation training and development needs.

Keep notes that, in England, devolution remains very much a work in progress and notes the failure of the Area Based Reviews to promote either a system or localism. The reviews were centrally devised and came to focus on cost-cutting and promoting mergers, often against the will of local stakeholders. He has concerns, too, about the extent to which the Adult Education Budget will be effectively devolved. The present proposals are very much short-term. Keep argues that the policy horizon needs to extend beyond the five-year term of a government. One might add that even five years would be a luxury, given ministerial

and policy volatility over the past few years. He describes the exploratory, tentative nature of devolution in England, with several levels of special identity: *pan-regional (the Northern Powerhouse, the Midlands Engine)*, *city regions (which may or may not have the same boundaries as the combined authority)*, *smaller cities, towns, LEPs and counties*. He notes that devolution is taking place against a backdrop of continuing national policy initiatives, for example the Sainsbury Review, student loans, apprenticeships and an expanded role for the Department for Education (DfE).

This is not surprising. Devolution is being constructed in a top-down fashion, with different levels of spatial identity. There is no clarity of vision. However, there are great expectations about rebalancing and refreshing the local economy, reinvigorating local accountability and bringing local knowledge to bear on complex problems. Clearly there is a gap between the policy goals that are aspired to and the actual powers and resources that are being granted to localities to achieve these goals. There is a danger, Keep argues, that devolution on the economic front is being over-sold at two levels. First, it may be unable to make significant inroads into some of the country's economic problems, in terms of either spatial re-balancing or weak productivity, and, second, that skills alone cannot bring about regeneration.

Keep makes the plausible assumption that future demand for learning will exceed the sums of public money available to fund it. Here he resumes his theme that further education should be within *local systems not mini-markets*, but he is not optimistic.

*Early signs are not uniformly encouraging. The majority of policy statements by localities suggest that traditional skills supply templates dominate their thinking about models for creating new local systems.*

He identifies two issues obstructing the development of coherent local systems. First, the perennial problem of matching skills supply to economic demand and, second, the difficulty of defining a locality: each of the special identities characterised above have permeable borders. He points out that Greater

Manchester, general regarded as an effective region, is built on a long-term legacy of collective collaboration. Other localities have to navigate around geographical, administrative and Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) boundaries, which do not add up and, importantly, which do not attract public allegiance.

Keep notes, in impressive detail, the significant weaknesses in the national economy that range between weak investment and geographical and structural imbalances. He speculates whether one of the drivers for devolution is to shift the blame for these underlying problems.

Returning to education and training, he develops an argument around two points of potential fracture: the tensions between national/local and between the market/planned systems. Despite the rhetoric of devolution, he identifies a continuous lapsing into centralised control. In a similar way, he shows that market forces are at present much stronger than coherent planning in shaping the education and training offer. Nevertheless, Keep notes one development that bucks this trend.

*It is worth noting that the publication of the Sainsbury Review of Technical Education and the government's response, the Post-16 Skills Plan, has created a major change in the fundamental choice between market-based competition and forms of planning. Both Sainsbury and the Government agree that the marketplace model for qualifications, overseen by a market regulator (Ofqual), has failed to deliver consistency and simplicity, and may in some instances have led to a race to the bottom in terms of rigour and quality.*

However, this is but one, if influential, policy development and Keep concludes that: *There is limited space within this model for substantive local policy influence or interventions.*

Turning to the adult skills budget, a budget that has been consistently trimmed in recent times, he notes that it clearly will go nowhere near to fulfilling all the demands made upon it and



this will be exacerbated by the prevailing low levels of local and regional funding. It does not bode well, and may contribute to a continuing limited vision for local provision:

*The majority of policy statements by localities suggest that traditional skills supply templates dominate their thinking about models for creating new local systems.*

One difficulty confronting local planning is the nature of demand as it applies to the sector. Colleges have to balance the free choices made by students, the varied skills demands from employers, national policy requirements and the need for learners to have some portability in their assessments of attainment. Permeability is a positive thing in a period of economic change and restructuring:

*Attempting to match local supply to local demand, particularly at higher skill levels, is difficult when one of the key policy thrusts of the (Northern) Powerhouse is to create new transport corridors that allow more commuters to travel to skilled jobs across the entire region.*

He notes that *more sophisticated models of local skills policies are available. Hodgson and Spours' model of ecosystems offers one way to approach this issue*, but this remains, for the moment, an aspirational rather than a descriptive model. At present the education and training market operates at the local, regional and national level (why else launch national institutes of technology?), with complex interactions.

Keep therefore offers four scenarios for the future.

1. Less of the same, a low-trust and declining system.
2. Patchwork quilt, a regional variation in the nature of the FE offer.
3. Markets rule, with local stakeholders choosing where to purchase their requirements.
4. Localism in the lead, a utopian vision where *the locality has become a powerful decision-maker, with*

*the confidence, organizational capacity, expertise and political 'space' to innovate and initiate policy discussions and development.*

At each level, national, regional and local, there will be problems around governance, with a distinct lack of capacity at the local level. Colleges currently have accountability at all three levels, which can lead to unnecessary overlap.

In conclusion, Keep fears that there is a danger of disappointment. Will there be new policy spaces or smaller versions of what went before? Any success will be hard to measure – but now might be the moment:

*Localisation does not diminish this problem. It simply suggests that without change, colleges will be ruled both by local and national forces and bodies. Localism therefore provides a powerful impetus for contemplating wider changes.*

Hence *metis*.

Scripting the future – exploring potential strategic leadership responses to the marketisation of English FE and vocational provision (Ewart Keep, 2018)

In her introduction to this follow up report, Dame Ruth Silver describes Keep's analysis of interconnected further education markets as portraying a 'perfect storm', but with colleges still obliged to:

*fulfil part of their social purpose mission by providing 'remedial' education and acting as 'provider of last resort'. This creates a challenge for leaders who must somehow find a way to operate successfully in this new – and for some quite alien – environment, while remaining true to their values and striving to meet the needs of their community.*

Keep is returning to his theme of undue pressure being placed on colleges by a range of centrally imposed obligations funded through inter-connected marketised arrangements. There is

thus no coherent system, but instead *greatly increased levels of competition between institutions for students and funds, and the arrival of new regulatory regimes to oversee this competition.*

Leaders are thus placed in the unenviable position of balancing success in the market place with wider, more altruistic societal and political goals and values. To Keep, this puts impossible strains upon leaders as they are forced to adopt business practices to ensure survival:

*Some aspects of economic theory suggest that rational actors will segment their markets and seek to avoid lower margin business.*

Yet this is not the perceived purpose of the sector, not the core mission and value of a college. As a result, leaders are forced to *reconcile the trade-offs between commercial pressures and delivering wider social outcomes.*

Keep argues that that the most important role for leaders is to develop a strategy which is able to achieve this reconciliation. The report identifies a number of structural problems that colleges face: FE is the provider of last resort; it has to remediate previous failure; progression is frequently into low-quality employment; technological and occupational change is constant; Brexit and its uncertain impact on skills and labour supply. There are funding issues, uncertainty about new governance arrangements as colleges take on new shapes, high-stakes accountability regimes, partial devolution and policy volatility emerging from a 'sealed unit' of government decision making:

*Taken individually, most of these items represent formidable management and leadership challenges. Taken together, they amount to a profoundly difficult environment within which to chart a course for institutional survival and growth.*

A perfect storm.

Keep returns to his theme of the dichotomy between markets and systems, but introduces a more subtle, nuanced view:

*Even in countries where a systems-based approach is dominant, such as Scotland, institutions are sometimes competing for scarce funding, students and prestige. In other words, inside systems there is often an element of contestability and competition.*

He draws a comparison between colleges and the railways, which also saw marketisation accompanied by a tightening of central control.

*Policymakers' desire to intervene in public service delivery is high, and where ministers feel that outcomes will reflect on them rather than on rail companies or FE colleges, the logical outcome is that ministers seek to intervene.*

There follows a detailed analysis of the FE market and the policies that have shaped it, and the aspirations of a 'new public management' a *combination of markets and system, or markets and governmental 'steering approach* seeking to obtain the best of both worlds. There are complex issues around competition in a market where someone else designs the product, unintended consequences and complex, multiple markets. FE customers are far less easy to define than is the case for either schools or universities. Financial stability is always at risk and some policies carry with them the potential for fraud. Policy aspiration is generally unrealistic, given the resources available. There are threats, too, from other policy areas, such as the increasingly fragile sustainability of mass HE and therefore the potential undermining of higher-level provision in FE.

Following a highly detailed analysis, the report summarises the tensions that distort the operation of the market and challenge the mission of the sector: social inclusion versus high-status vocational courses; markets versus systems; national versus local; and pupil choice versus employer demand which is often out-of-kilter with policy aspiration. Within this mix of tensions and confused policy, Keep points out that:

*FE is well positioned to contribute to this more integrated policy model. Colleges know how to offer re-training and upskilling opportunities; they have strong links to*

*local communities and a track record of engaging with individuals and groups otherwise lost to education; in many cases they possess contacts with local employers.*

This has led to models of regional systems whereby colleges are the anchor institution, supporting local enterprise and economic activity. FE can provide leadership both in social inclusion and in supplying a locality with the requisite skills to run its economy.

The report moves on to consider the role of the employer who may not share the more altruistic intent of a college:

*Employers logically want a surfeit of skills (in order to give them hiring choice and drive down wages). If these can be provided at cost to the state and the student rather than themselves, so much the better. If they have to train at their own expense, they may not want the skills to be certified or transferable.*

Colleges can be critical in developing a positive relationship, and that does seem to be, at present, a discernible trend:

*Hodgson et al. argue that colleges and employers are not bound to end up in a simple, market-based customer-supplier relationship and that longer-term, more trust-based models can be developed, especially if the relationship is conceptualised as the kind of two-way street advocated by the CAVTL report. In this model, co-design, co-production and co-operation within an emergent skill ecosystem, rather than a spot-market for skills, becomes the aim.<sup>12</sup>*

Based on this complex and far-ranging analysis, Keep offers three scenarios for the year 2023. He cautions that they are not forecasts, but possible futures which can help leaders in FE to

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12 Hodgson, A., Spours, K., Jeanes, J., Smith, D., Vine-Morris, M., Vihriala, R., Bollam, J., Cook, B., Clendenning, D., Harris, M. and Kazempour, T. 2017. *Beyond Employer Engagement: Exploring the nature of partnership working for skills development*. ELVET Programme Research Briefing 2, London: UCL Institute of Education, Centre for Post-14 Education and Work.

anticipate and respond to the potential challenges that might arise in the near future.

The first scenario is that of complete marketisation. Keep foresees a result of this prospect being the emergence of tertiary institutions, involving the merger of low-tariff universities with a local college and the merged institution proceeding to take control of nearby academies and other schools, motivated by a dysfunctional HE system.

The second scenario is a *messy marketplace*, a continuation of conflicting market and policy tensions. In the resulting competition for students there are a number of losers and there follows the collapse and closure of some universities and colleges, an unforeseen consequence of policy which may alarm the government. Some localities may find themselves stripped of provision with the closure of anchor institutions putting local economies at risk. There is now a tension between local and national leaders leading to a new policy *based around socially inclusive economic growth and fair work, which plays to FE's core strengths*.

The third scenario is the reinvention of a *further education system*, or even a wider system, given the Labour Party's policy for a National Education Service. This model will place a greater onus on employers, with some shared responsibilities, including funding. In the most realistic assessment of the likely impact of artificial intelligence on future employment, this model envisages retraining of the existing workforce, growth in *instructional capacity*, closer collaboration on skills development, work re-organisation and re-design, and new business strategies.

The three scenarios are fleshed out in impressive detail, evidence of Keep's considerable grasp of interlocking policies, demographic trends, and institutional tendencies. He ends the report with 15 searching questions, of which the last is the most challenging: Does a skill ecosystem approach make sense?

# GOVERNANCE AND POLICY FOR THE SECTOR

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*Recognising excellence in the governance of independent training providers* (Susan Pember, AELP)

This research project examined an aspect of independent training provision that is under-researched, and not widely appreciated. The project was commissioned to examine governance of independent training providers, to reflect on good practice in other parts of the further education sector and elsewhere. As Dame Ruth Silver says in her foreword, *Governance is perhaps the least understood and, in some ways, least transparent aspect of our public life*. But, as Martin Dunford observes in his foreword, *the bottom line is that good governance is no longer an optional extra*.

This project is timely. The report notes the low take-up of any code of governance among independent providers and the need for a more robust approach to governance within this group. Indeed, the independent training provider sector, unlike the college sector, does not have an agreed definition of governance. Thus, the project extended its remit to develop a draft code of good governance for the independent training sector based on the good practice identified in the research. The project examines definitions of governance from the OECD, the Institute of Directors, the UK Corporate Governance Code, the college sector, and an excellent example from an independent training provider rated outstanding by Ofsted.

To cite the college sector (AoC, 2013):

*Governance is the act of governing – not managing. Governance provides strategic leadership and direction to an organisation. It sets and approves policies and the*

*budget, defines expectations, delegates powers, and verifies performance towards delivering its strategic aims and objectives.*

The distinction between governance and management is an important one and, especially for small organisations, a complex one to maintain. As the research goes on to note, of the independent training providers that this study surveyed (91), seven ignored the questions on governance. Roughly 25 per cent report that they adhere to the UK Corporate Governance Code and just under 10 per cent to the Charity Commission Code. That leaves the majority with no form of governance. Clearly, those that are legally charities are required to adhere to the requirements of the Charity Commission, but for many others governance has been lamentably neglected. The research concludes:

*The survey of 91 ITPs suggested that governance structures are underdeveloped, with 67 per cent having no governing body, supervisory or advisory board and one-third called for more support on 'being strategic'.*

Fortunately, Ofsted is now looking into this as part of the Common Inspection Framework. Hence the timeliness of this research and the resulting development of a draft code of governance.

The report goes on to scrutinise 120 Ofsted reports of inspections of a range of independent providers. This shows that there are many examples of good or outstanding practice. Ofsted inspectors found that governors, or those in that role, at good providers, *understood and used relevant data on each stage of the learners' journey*. The detail of this analysis will be invaluable to providers seeking to improve their governance strategy and, indeed, their civic connections. In summary, it can be noted that where providers were judged to be inadequate governance was deemed to be ineffective. This link between governance and effectiveness is reflected in other institutional activity. Strong governors demonstrated good industrial knowledge, and strong



business or financial acumen. A common weakness was that of no independent board voice or weak challenge and lack of oversight. This may cross-refer to an earlier finding that owners often sat on some form of governance board and, therefore, may exert undue influence. Boards were also often hampered by not having a clerk or similar professional to support their activity.

The research team also made six observations of board meetings and presented detailed case studies. They found a mixed approach to structures, but a good use of independent members to provide challenge. Meetings continue to cover both governance and management issues, leading to a blurring of the two. However, there is good use of data and financial appraisals and a 'robust' focus on the learner, including safeguarding.

The team also noted little use of other governance codes to shape practice. Helpfully, the report turns to look at codes in other sectors, starting from the seven principles of public life ranging over corporate college and charity codes. These then form the basis for the development of a code of good governance applicable to independent providers. This is illustrated by a limited case-study.

The result is a series of recommendations, mostly concerning the development of a sector code by the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), but also calling for support from the DfE, the Education and Skills Funding Agency and Ofsted. That code has now been produced and can be found at:

<https://www.aelp.org.uk/resource-and-information-centre/resource-and-information-centre/publications/new-code-of-good-governance-launched-for-independent-training-providers/>

Hopefully, this will be taken up and help rectify a serious deficit in an important segment of the sector.

Higher Education in Further Education: Leading the Challenge  
(John Widdowson and Madeleine King, 2018)

John Widdowson's leadership of the Mixed Economy Group of colleges has long been admired. Member colleges effectively reflect many of the aspirations of the sector. They contribute to widening participation through increasing the involvement in HE of underrepresented groups, and to skills excellence through working with employers to identify and provide economically valuable skills. This study is timely, as Neil Bates states in his foreword, as we are entering a *period of substantial reform, which has focused particularly on the need for higher technical skills*. The conversion of polytechnics to university status (1992) left a gap in higher-skills provision which policymakers are now attempting to fill. At the same time, as noted elsewhere in this review of FETL publications, there are disruptions in the HE market with a declining demographic and unconditional offers being used competitively to attract and enrol students. At the time of writing it is not clear whether this indiscriminate recruitment will be into courses that provide economically useful skills, an area in which FE is skilled, or into a more traditional academic offer. This space has become very fluid, and sadly so. The UK continues to perform poorly in higher-level skills provision compared to our economic neighbours.

Only a few colleges have their own degree-awarding powers; the majority are dependent for non-prescribed HE on a partnership with a university for validation and progression. As the HE market destabilises, some of these partnerships are at risk. On the other hand, colleges have an important role to play in the provision of higher-level skills, particularly at levels 4 and 5, drawing in students who would probably not attend a university and providing part-time provision. It is important to recognise that HE in FE is generally of a technical or vocational nature. Much of it is sub-degree, but with clear lines of progression into degree-level study or employment. An important area of provision supplied by colleges is where there is a requirement for a 'licence to practice' or a professional qualification. Collaboration with colleges should be perceived as being in the long-term interests of universities. Widdowson and King devote a substantial section to consider the nature and maintenance of partnerships. A recurring theme in

this and other publications reviewed here is that of colleges being anchor institutions in their communities:

*Because of their role as local anchor institutions, colleges are more likely than universities to have an awareness of the impact of geography on the ability of local residents to access HE, and/or the relative lack of provision for particular technical or occupational specialisms.*

The report notes that 80 per cent of college HE students come from their local LEP region, compared to 36 per cent of university students. Some FE provision is historical in nature as, for example, when a mono-technic institution, such as one providing mining skills or art and design, has been absorbed through merger. There is also a strong argument for new provision where:

*Colleges respond to demand when their FE students are either unable to secure places at local universities or those universities fail to provide direct progression pathways, particularly for vocational learners at Level 3.*

For learners, the decision to study in a college is influenced by external factors: location, nature of the course, direct sight of employment, high levels of contact time, cost and mode of study, domestic and employment constraints. While the financial cost to those choosing to study HE in FE can be lower, the opportunity cost to those students choosing to study in colleges who have a range of responsibilities will be higher. Therefore, the nature of the student experience is important as students are likely to be highly critical of the service that they receive. Students expect good teaching, with business or industry credibility, a HE environment with distinctive full- and part-time provision, student support and value for money.

This report proceeds to focus on leadership: *HE in FE, therefore, represents a fast-changing environment, needing clear strategic leadership and effective operational approaches.* The findings are clear: colleges should have a sound rationale for offering HE provision. Once the role and purpose of such provision

has been established, then decisions need to be made about its presentation. The report is careful to clarify the nature of HE in FE. It discusses the symbolism of accommodation, the differing pedagogy requiring and encouraging independence of thought, the nature of, and support for the lecturing staff, the role of scholarship or of maintaining industrial competence, and a different approach to the assessment of quality. It advises leaders to devise suitable structures which support the nature of the provision which is to be established in the college, to think through issues to do with research, scholarship, and industrial/professional development, to be clear about lines of communication with employers and students, and to maintain 'robust' HE quality systems. This represents a leadership challenge, as it can involve a major change of culture:

*Unless the college is certain that it can create an HE community for its staff as well as its students, the venture into HE should be reconsidered.*

Leaders should have a clear rationale, strategy and curriculum. They should consider the positioning of the college in a highly competitive environment and the danger of mission drift, while seeking to create an appropriate ethos. Leaders need to work closely with governors to establish suitable reporting mechanisms, and they need to be able to give time to employers and partner universities.

*Colleges are generally well-rooted in their local communities. They are also better able to meet the needs of small and medium sized enterprises, often building on links made for lower level provision to illustrate the business benefits of a more highly skilled workforce.*

Leaders need to move in to this space. The report cites Ewart Keep:

*Colleges have been socialised into, and are extremely adept at, reacting to external stimuli in highly innovative and entrepreneurial ways, but may not be quite as proficient at*

*carving out their own visions, priorities, and establishing the means to deliver these – either on their own or in partnership with others.*

In developing HE, leaders also need to be pro-active, to confirm the value of technical and vocational provision, and have a clear line of sight to work. Leaders, the report concludes, should be open to working in new ways and with new partners. They should challenge existing course design, structures and delivery; be innovative with technology; look towards gaining degree awarding powers; and move in to new spaces.

Employers in the Driving Seat? New thinking for FE leadership (Paul Warner and Cath Gadding, AELP, 2018)

This wide-ranging report from the AELP tackles one of the major structural problems confronting TVET in both the UK and internationally: *How can we increase employer engagement in education and how can we ensure we meet their needs in a way that supports economic prosperity?* It is a massive problem. The study looks at whether recent policy interventions, including the Richard Review, have improved matters. But, as Dame Ruth Silver concludes, in her foreword, *the answer would appear to be ‘no’, or at best ‘not enough’*. Mark Dawe, in his foreword, also shares this gloomy opinion. There has been no improvement, only large employers engage, the state will not yield control, employers defer to the expertise of educators, there are frustrations around SME apprenticeships, learners needs are not met, and we are stuck in a cycle of low skills and low mobility. It is quite a list. The answer, thinks Dawe, is that *the sector needs to blow its own trumpet more and be more assertive as to what its role should be*. This is surely right. If we wait for a benign and effective new policy, we might be waiting for some time. Dawe says:

*So, for a system to be sustainable we need it to be designed in such a way that everyone feels in control of the elements they should be responsible for within a defined and sustainable system. At the moment, the research suggests that no-one feels like they are in control of anything.*

The report starts on a positive note. Warner and Gladding note policy aspirations:

*Over the last two decades, vocational skills and further education (FE) policy in England has seen a sustained rise in prominence in the role of employers in its shaping and purpose. Indeed, right across the education system, the notion of education and learning as having inherent worth is, it can be argued, losing ground to the primacy of the needs of industry, productivity and employers.*

They set out to answer three challenging questions:

- Does the sector agree that employers are in the driving seat of policy?
- How does the sector respond to rhetoric of this nature, and how does it affect the issues that its leaders need to face up to and the decisions they have to make?
- Does the 'driving seat' description help to clarify a fundamental purpose for the FE sector, or does it just lead the sector to an ideological perception of what FE ought to be?

They speak to a large number of senior leaders over a wide geographical spread and a range of institutions. In an interesting aside, they note that college leaders *have a more 'socially oriented' view of the role of skills and technical training in society, while ITPs leaders may have a more 'commercially oriented' view.* Nevertheless, and to the surprise of the authors, there was a high degree of commonality across institutions and a shared perception across the sector.

The chapter headings in this report rather stretch the boundaries of the 'driving seat' metaphor first used by David Cameron in 2013. The headings include *Revvng up, Deciding the destination, Who wants a lift?, Follow the sat nav.* The metaphor is mortally flogged by the end, but the perceptions are sound. The report includes a history of policy development which is followed by

a scrutiny of the identity of FE, and an examination of where employer links have worked.

The authors outline the major developments in technical education over the past few decades. What they highlight is that policy volatility has led to a *fragmented and complex system*. A policy area that is also significantly under-funded, seeking to serve students who themselves are often struggling financially. They describe a process whereby the government decides what is best for businesses. Any collaboration by employers has been on a voluntary basis and, therefore, not representative of the needs of all employers and, in particular, of small businesses.

The established system of the 1950s, with apprenticeships into large manufacturing firms, supported by polytechnics and adult education, crumbles, they say, and is replaced by the 'progressive teaching' of the 60s and 70s. This is a rather sweeping view, lacking nuance, but the focus of this research is specifically on employer involvement. They assert:

*It [government] embarked on a process of reform that gave a level of autonomy to colleges from local authority control that it was thought might give them better responsiveness to local economic needs.*

That is not how most commentators see incorporation, which represented a move away from local accountability through a local authority in to a national system. Despite the great increase in participation following incorporation, they describe falling numbers in FE from 2005 onwards and the development of a low-skills equilibrium. To counter this, they state:

*England has (almost organically) developed a complex picture of technical education provision in which employers are centrally enmeshed.*

There is little evidence given. Indeed, it is the general view that in contrast to the other three nations of the UK, with their clear regional strategies, England appears to have no coherent policy

of employer engagement. The authors are quite right to point out that smaller employers have been overlooked in the design of technical qualifications.

The research indicates that, on the whole, current policies are moving in the direction of the needs of the economy. The report focuses on the dual mandate identified by Vince Cable in 2015, with its renewed emphasis on higher-level professional and technical skills, while continuing to address social mobility and civic interaction. An interesting observation from the many discussions that inform this research is that:

*Many sector leaders felt that governments make the most of this uncertainty about purpose and mission to push their own priorities, a view echoed by Professor Martin Doel (2018), who said of FE: '[There is] a requirement to do everything, which then gives it no sense of owning anything, which means new ministers come in feeling they can change the programme without it being noticed or being remarked upon or having a strong constituency to stick up for it. So, institutions in the sector are driven by outside policy changes and have little agency to determine those changes themselves, and that's a concern going forward'.*

The research notes that the apprenticeship system has had considerable policy focus in recent times – *the Government itself says they are the 'flagship' skills policy* while, at the same time, T-levels are being developed for a college offer. What is less clear from the research is the role of the employer in this innovation. Roundtables indicated a continuation of the government assuming they understand employer needs, but that these needs relate solely to large employers especially those that contribute to the Levy. Discussions indicated that small enterprises are now less engaged. There was a consensus from the discussions that both FE colleges and independent trainers are driven by funding and that funding drives government policy:

*It was very clear that despite the rhetoric, very few in the sector believe that the current reforms either address employer need particularly well, or help social mobility.*



Those giving evidence to this research included 11 large employers and four trade bodies. These indicated that they had felt involved in the restructure and delivery of apprenticeships. An interesting finding was that, through their trade bodies, small firms felt that they, too, could contribute. Nevertheless, the authors conclude:

*The evidence we gathered from sector leaders firmly reflects their belief that the state is in the driving seat. It controls the money, is always legally responsible and has to regulate the market in some way to help control supply and demand.*

Moreover, in further education the evidence from the roundtables is that employers continue to be reluctant to become involved: training is seen as a burden. This is a cultural issue not experienced by all countries. One item discussed at the roundtables was the extent to which employers and providers spoke the same language.

*The considerable expertise of the FE workforce, sector leaders believe, lies in fostering and training individuals to contribute to both economic and social life and this creates a barrier between them.*

The report concludes with 14 recommendations. Two relate to the 'sector' and five to policymakers. There are seven recommendations for learning providers, largely to do with engagement and profile. There is none for employers.



# EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

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Hidden leadership: Exploring the assumptions that define further education leadership (Simon Western, 2018)

This research sets out to: *explore the hidden assumptions that determine and limit leadership practice, with the aim of unleashing new leadership potential across the FE system.* Western and his research team clearly have some suspicions about leadership in the sector:

*If a senior team shows controlling, top-down leadership and yet talks about distributing leadership and empowerment, it is experienced as yet another form of 'fake news'.*

It is self-evident that if leaders promise one thing and deliver another there is bound to be disillusion. However, this research does not look at the external pressure facing leaders, which are well documented within the other studies in this review. These include constant policy change, challenging regulatory regimes, inadequate funding, and personality assassination that is impacting on the sector, all potentially thwarting leadership aspirations. Instead, the research concentrates in the internal dynamics of leadership, and in particular of leadership styles. Much of his modelling comes from looking at practices across commercial organisations (for example, McDonald's, clinics) rather than exclusively from FE.

Refreshingly, it breaks away from the now rather stale metaphors of leadership development that have become established in the sector, terms such as coercive, affiliative, pace-setting, democratic and so forth. The report offers four new discourses: controller, therapist, messiah and eco-leadership. These discourses,

developed in Western's doctoral thesis, enable the authors to reflect on the way leadership is perceived.

Surveys were reviewed from 330 returns. There was no perceptible difference in the responses from male and female, both showing a ranking in perceived leadership styles in the same order, that is therapist, eco-leader, messiah and controller. It is interesting to note that the younger the participant, the greater the belief in therapist leadership. It would be interesting to explore how far, if at all, perceptions of leadership approaches have changed over the years, but as these are new categories, mapping against the traditional models of 'discourse' could be unreliable.

Western interprets the result of the surveys as *a preference for humanistic, relational and supportive leadership approaches*, which is encouraging. It is perhaps to be anticipated that respondents would not favour a 'controller' style. The research goes on to examine 'aspirational' discourses. This positioned eco-leadership as the most important leadership discourse, indicating a general wish that this should constitute the future direction of leadership in the FE sector. The team goes on to conclude that what is required is *a radical redistribution of leadership. This is required to ensure that leadership shifts from a focus on people holding positions of power in hierarchies, to leadership being distributed throughout the whole organisation.* This is an interesting way to arrive at the concept of distributed management, widely seen, at present, as a developing facet of FE management. In the sector this is largely seen through the lens of the scale of emerging colleges, and the location of key staff in differing or local communities of practice.

Now Western introduces a further perspective, that of *connecting internal ecosystems*. This is an interesting take on the evolving leadership model, as colleges merge, which enables the new institution to embrace a number of legacy brands and to create new internal identities. It would be interesting to develop this concept further. What is suggested is that *a much greater connectivity within organisations and joined-up thinking across the*

sector is urgently required. It is unlikely that this will be disputed. It is the 'how' that needs to be addressed, *how organisations, locally, regionally and nationally, engage with external regulators, political influencers and governance bodies.*

At this stage, the report changes its focus, away from the internal dynamics of college leadership to the relationship with the external environment, *thinking strategically, learning how to lead in new ways to influence networks and stakeholders.* Again, this harmonises with much contemporary thinking about the evolving leadership role, and how college leaders engage with their environments to develop regional anchor roles. In this respect, Western observes that *messiah leadership is no longer as popular as it has been in the past.* 'Popular' is probably the wrong word; it is doubtful if it ever was popular as a style. Whether it was common as a description of leadership style is open to debate. A more perceptive conclusion is that *the task for leaders is to try to get the right balance of leadership in their particular context.* This is refreshing, as it moves us away from characterising leaders as being of a certain type, suggesting instead that the metaphors and categories offered are helpful in understanding that leaders need to be skilled at reading and interpreting a range of environments and then adopting a suitable response.

The research involved a series of focus groups from which they identified five key themes: communication:

- clarity
- fragmentation and connectivity
- internal desire versus external pressure
- a vibrant workforce with learners at the centre
- future leadership.

These, the report says, *give clear insights into its current challenges and the ability to discuss challenges and tensions openly.* As a framework for discussion these themes are clearly useful, if rather generalised. The report moves on to consider *leadership*

*symptoms in the FE sector. A leadership symptom is the hidden essence that leadership and followership repetitively circle around, unable to escape its gravitational pull.* That is to say that they are culturally specific. Symptoms are identified by the researchers as:

- External pressures and constraints. This is most certainly true and identified in most of FETL's work. This is rather a late stage in the report to introduce a factor seen by many as crucial in constraining leadership approaches in the sector.
- Lack of direction. One response was: we are old and recycled as a sector and a country. The sense of disillusion among participants is strong.
- Wrong values. FE as a whole is about money. No mention here of the altruism for which the sector is widely admired. But the staffroom grumbles continue.
- Survival is a symptom. According to respondents FE leadership has become reactive and managerial.
- Development versus compliance: There is a dissonance generated by a tense and unresolvable conflict between the caring, developmental aspect of the task, and the shifting and inconsistent demands of governors and government. This clearly requires further elaboration. Not only does it not do justice to FE governors who devote hours of unpaid time to overseeing the responsibilities of colleges to their clients, it also begs the question of whether any publicly funded organisation is at liberty to determine its own mission and purpose.
- Providing opportunities. This is a reference to the social inclusion role of colleges. There are other roles of course, such as supplying high-level skills for entry in to employment which are not mentioned, but at least this bullet concludes a somewhat dismal list with a positive note.

As the report moves on to key findings we have a challenge to consider: *that of changing the 'libidinal economy' in FE*. This it turns out is *the emotional and unconscious dynamics that drive individual, social and organisational behaviour*. Western states:

*A key finding from our research is that in the FE sector, the libidinal economy shows how people gain unconscious pleasure from their displeasure.*

This may go some way to explaining many an overheard staffroom conversation!

The report concludes with three recommendations.

1. *Creating networks of desire*: FE should seize the time and assert itself.
2. *New approaches to leadership development*. We should embrace eco-leadership. This, apparently, is more than putting potential leaders through a training programme but looking at issues such a place and organisational development. There is, it seems, a lack of understanding of leadership, and a lack of space to empower staff.
3. *Orchestrating a 'big leadership conversation' across the sector*. A conversation is needed around frameworks, engagement and networks. We should *go to the global and back* because *the medium is the message*.

This, the research tells us, indicates a positive future for the leadership of FE.

Beating the odds, and the system: Purpose-led transformation in further education (Matt Hamnett, 2019).

This is a courageous book by Matt Hamnett. His decision to resign as the chief executive officer of the Hart Learning Group after two years in post led to widespread and not always favourable publicity. There was frequent reference to his high salary. As we write, his wrangle with the FE Commissioner continues. In recent times many college principals have taken a battering, some cruelly so. Hamnet's book comes as a timely

riposte to some of the sneering attacks on leaders who seek to bring about reform while confronted by vicious financial constraints and labyrinthine regulatory regimes.

Dame Ruth Silver captures this precisely in a FETL 'provocation', *Ending the Shame Game*. After stating clearly that nobody in the sector should have any problems with high standards of conduct or rigorous accountability, she puts her finger on recent malice:

*very often the criticism levelled at leaders is harsh and intemperate, the judgements passed by those charged with holding us to account poorly informed and without context, and the general tone of discourse around institutional failure unflinchingly personal and sometimes abusive.*<sup>13</sup>

Hamnet's book is a helpful response, delineating in detail the pressures and frustrations that cascade on to the leaders of change and the hostile environment in which they are often forced to operate. As Silver says in her splendid foreword to Hamnett's work:

*Achieving swift, noticeable culture change in an organisation is one of the toughest challenges a leader can take on. It is a particular challenge in the further education sector, characterised, as it is, by significant budgetary constraint, a demanding accountability regime and a culture of high expectations combined with regular and often ill-considered top-down policy reform.*

She continues:

*there is, of course, no one way to run a college and there are no ready-made solutions when it comes to changing the culture and performance of an organisation. That would be the wrong way to read this paper. Rather, it gives leaders different options and ways of thinking about problems and challenges that may or may not be relevant to them, and, I very much hope, the confidence to try something different.*

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<sup>13</sup> Silver, R. 2019. *Ending the Shame Game: Fostering wisdom in organisational life*. FETL.



The tone of the book is sometimes a little strident, sometimes a little defensive, occasionally more about management than leadership, but all this is understandable for someone who has been through the grinder. The work has currency, the detail is welcome, the insight helpful. The book is interspersed with personal details, because that is how we live:

*I have drafted the piece in the first person, sharing something of myself as I go because further education is personal for those who work in it – and so is leadership.*

Hamnett is quite clear about the successful outcomes that he achieved:

*Between 2014/15 and the end of 2016/17 we:*

- Increased 16–18 achievement rates by almost 9 percentage points.*
- Substantially improved GCSE maths and English achievement rates.*
- Increased apprenticeship achievement rates by almost 5 percentage points.*
- Increased all-age, all-level achievement rates by almost 8 percentage points.*
- Launched an award-winning commercial business which secured large, national apprenticeship deals with clients including the Co-op and Lloyds.*
- Negotiated several large-scale capital asset disposals and exit from a long list of onerous and off-mission commercial arrangements.*
- Dramatically improved the financial performance of the joint venture through which we operated three colleges in Saudi Arabia.*

- *Improved the group's overall financial outturn from a loss of over £6.2 million in 2014/15 to a surplus of over £700,000 for 2016/17.*
- *Reduced borrowing as a percentage of income from 36 per cent at the end of 2014/15 to 23 per cent at the end of 2016/17.*

In this list there is a strong focus on the business side of things. That, alas, is what college leaders are judged on. Hamnett is aware of the wider mission:

*Delivering any form of public service is a really tough gig. Citizen expectations are high. Government policy and measures of success change often, and it can be difficult for public service organisations to stay focussed on their customers, given the attention that government commands.*

Hamnett's career, before he took up the post of CEO and principal, had been outside of FE. There are arguments both ways on this. From Hamnett's viewpoint it gives him access to differing perspectives, which he uses generally to good effect throughout the book. It is a strong feature of his work. This, for example, is a helpful insight:

*Colleges also often receive what is known in American politics as 'unfunded mandates', i.e. new expectations not accompanied by additional resources. For example, the 2015/16 condition of funding changes with respect to maths and English brought very substantial costs of change, ongoing operational costs – as well as an incredibly challenging performance expectation – but no serious funding. The relationship between price and cost in further education long since ended in messy divorce.*

He extends this idea later with the notion of *phantom* (menace?) *policies* (i.e. those which are announced but never quite get to the point where they have substance).

Yet, at times, his comparisons from a wide range of leadership anecdotes are just too culturally dissonant to be convincing, such as wonderful transformations brought about at the NYU Langone Medical Centre in the US.

Hamnett does not question the legitimacy of the performance indicators with which FE has to work. He compares the performance of FE to other public sectors, for example:

*At the end of 2016/17, 31 per cent of further education colleges were rated Requires Improvement or Inadequate by Ofsted.*

*In July 2017, only 20 per cent of adult social care providers, and 8 per cent of General Practitioners were rated Requires Improvement or Inadequate by the Care Quality Commission (CQC).*

It is an interesting comparison, but not one on which to build a substantial case. The cultures of both the providers and the assessment agencies are substantially different, and neither social workers nor GPs are hemmed in by schools and universities cluttering the market and receiving beneficial funding from a cluster of privileged civil servants and politicians who have no knowledge of, and even less sympathy for an *underfunded FE sector*. He is similarly uncritical of Ofsted judgements.

*I tested these conclusions with an experienced, senior Ofsted inspector who confirmed this aggregate diagnosis and reinforced the need for strong, insightful and relentless leadership and management to drive improvement – often missing in poorly performing colleges.*

Given the subtlety of his analysis elsewhere, this is a little naive and takes no heed of the various antagonistic forces faced by colleges which he describes with great clarity elsewhere in the book. In this respect, it is a work of contrasts. His use of Zaffron and Unruh is discerning:

*[They] counsel that organisations should be seen as a 'network of conversations' – leadership, managerial and individual in nature. Leaders need to understand and use all of those different channels to build momentum behind their change.*

This sensitive understanding of the complexity of colleges is at odds with assertions elsewhere that indicate a style which Western (above) would doubtless term 'messianic':

*As such, leaders should expect that the transformation will impact them and shape the leaders they will become in the future. I know that I would not have been able to lead colleagues to deliver the progress we achieved during my time at Hart Learning Group (HLG) without each and every one of the career experiences I enjoyed before that; and that I am now a different and better leader because of my experience of the HLG transformation.*

Hamnett likes structures: he describes a road-map, version control, performance management and accountability arrangements, a process excellence approach, a discrete business unit. These have clearly been introduced as innovations. There is perhaps a lack of introspection, of sensitivity to what is already present. However, Chapter 7 makes a telling point, one that Western could consider:

*There is also strong evidence that the skills and expertise required to lead transformation are very different to those required to lead during 'business as usual'; neither skill set is more valuable than the other, but they are different.*

This conclusion merits more research, but intuitively it rings true. There are times requiring radical change, and times requiring stability. The effective leader is one that can adjust their style to the environment. Hamnett clearly made massive changes to the Hart Group. Perhaps his exhaustion at the end is an indication that he, himself, was unable to change and adapt.

Much of what follows is narrative: useful as a history but could benefit from more analysis. The great capital funding fiasco of the Learning and Skills Council is retold in detail, perhaps gleefully, as they had been such consistent critics of college financial management. Sometimes things are asserted uncritically, again lacking introspection:

*As a result of inspirational leadership, there has been a substantial and positive impact on the culture of the college and a rapid improvement in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.... Senior leaders have ensured good communications at all levels in the college and have developed a culture of trust and respect. Consequently, staff feel respected and valued. They contribute effectively by using their expertise to improve the quality of provision and outcomes for learners*

At times his leadership model appears very formulaic. There are ten principles, seven pillars and so forth. They do not have the feel of flexibility.

The book concludes with some sentimental and personal observations. Hamnett is to be congratulated on his openness. His book is a useful record in what is a bruising time for colleges, and interesting insight into the personal challenges of leadership in an essentially hostile policy environment.

Leading skills: Exploring leadership in Further Education colleges – Paper 1. The future of Further Education and the backgrounds of college leaders (Ben Savours and Nigel Keohane, 2019)

This second piece from the Social Market Foundation focuses on three areas of investigation: why further education and its leadership matter; how the socio-economic and delivery context for FE leaders is changing; and who leads FE colleges. It will be followed by a further paper which will look at professional development for college leaders. Characteristically, for the Social

Market Foundation, it draws upon a strong evidence base. This is used to demonstrate convincingly that leadership matters:

*Compared to studying in a college led by a low performing leader, a successful leader can improve the likelihood of a student achieving a Level 2 qualification by 15.9 percentage points and a Level 3 by 14.1 percentage points.*

Leadership in FE must attend to the *twin economic and social mission by providing educational opportunities to young people, adults and employers within a diverse range of settings. Central to success in these missions is effective leadership.*

Compared to schools, the authors state, there has been comparatively little analysis of what skills college leaders need and how they can be developed. There are some startling figures: a third of college leaders are over 55, and a third are expecting to leave over the next year. Over 80 per cent state that funding is the main challenge facing leaders in FE. There are major, and mounting, concerns about the *risks and pressures faced by FE principals*. At the time of writing, this is escalating into a national scandal with some leaders being treated in a wretched and callous manner. Given the crisis in skills being experienced in the UK economy (16th in the OECD rankings for technical skills), it is hardly credible that the leaders capable of generating those skills should find their time taken up by dealing with the effects of chronic underfunding. There is a grave danger that the sector will be seriously depleted at a time when it is vital for future prosperity.

Yet, despite these challenges, colleges are performing well on the whole, with 76 per cent of GFE colleges rated good or outstanding in 2017/18. Again, there are some interesting statistics. There are 2.2 million students in the sector. For those who gain a Level 2, the average income uplift is 11 per cent and for those who gain a Level 3 it is a further 9 per cent. This social mobility theme is further underpinned by more useful statistics. *Three in five pupils from poorer families attended a further*

*education or sixth form college as opposed to four in ten among affluent pupils.* Yet it is from the latter, affluent group, of course, that policy-makers are drawn.

Having identified the policy volatility and flux afflicting FE, the authors come to the conclusion that *adapting and responding to these complex and rapidly-changing challenges and opportunities is a core purpose of FE leadership* apparently in that time which is left over from worrying about how to make ends meet.

Roughly two-thirds of college principals have a background in education and training. However, there is a now trend in large colleges to separate the leadership of teaching from the business side of college leadership. Some, but fewer, leaders progress through the administration side of college management, for example, finance, while others are appointed from outside the sector from both public and private institutions. The research discovered that most principals have some experience of working outside the sector, which is not surprising as most FE staff are initially recruited for their established trade or professional competence. Where principals manage complex colleges with multiple campuses, they are more likely to have had senior leadership experience outside the sector. Such leaders require multiple skills and work in a distributed way, assigning leadership roles across the senior team.

The authors note that *successive and repeated policy reforms have undermined the mission of FE.* In this context, the research moves on to consider two further research questions:

- *What is the changing socio-economic and delivery context for FE colleges and their leaders?*
- *Who are FE college leaders, how do they get there, and what are their skills and experiences?*

A third will be the subject of a further study.

- *How can the FE sector get the leadership skills and capabilities that it needs?*

After a brief history of FE from the 1940s to the present day, the authors identify four economic drivers that they feel will impact significantly on FE: *a greater focus on homegrown skills; stronger and more even growth underpinned by high-quality education; stronger core of technical skills to underpin the economy; and social mobility.*

However, the report notes that at present the sector is characterized by *funding pressures, college structures and mergers, competition, greater devolution of policy decisions, technology and the learning offer, perpetual flux and policy uncertainty.*

This is an odd list. Funding and flux are clearly oppressive, but one impact of merger has been to reduce competition, and many college leaders see devolution and, indeed, technology as entirely positive developments. Nevertheless, it is clearly true that:

*There is growing unease in some quarters at the pressures faced by college principals, following high-profile departures of leaders in the recent past. In November 2018, David Hughes, Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges argued that: 'We will struggle to create the culture, the environment and the institutions we want if the leadership roles are fraught with risk and potential vilification'.*

The conclusions are inescapable. *FE colleges are at a watershed moment. Policy changes, a shifting landscape and a tight financial settlement are leading to question marks over the future viability of some FE colleges.*

The range of competencies required for effective leadership has extended and diversified greatly over the years, as colleges have grown in scale and the policy environment become more complex across a range of responsibilities: *pedagogy and curriculum; internal operations and finance; community leadership and partnerships; and external commercial relationships*



We look forward to the next part of this research, an exploration of how other sectors are led, and how we can help leaders prepare for these daunting tasks.

*The role of leadership in prioritising and improving the quality of teaching and learning in further education* (Matt O’Leary, Rob Smith, Vanessa Cui and Fadia Dakka. Birmingham City University and OSPACE, 2019)

At a time when talented leaders in FE are preoccupied with funding cuts and policy instability, it is refreshing to read a report which focuses on the role of leadership in teaching and learning. This research is very much about the interactions between teachers and learners: *improving teaching and learning is about creating an environment in which collegial interaction can flourish.*

The research examines the professional activity in the staff of three further education colleges. It looks at the vexations staff experience with dwindling funds and an undue emphasis on inspection. The danger is that this deflects us from the purpose of the sector. As Dame Ruth Silver summarises in her foreword:

*It shows how important it is for leaders also to be learners and listeners and gives some compelling examples of how such leaders practice the leadership of learning and teaching.*

As she concludes:

*What I liked particularly about the report was that it gets that what we in further education lead is learning. I think it is time we reasserted this and made it the unqualified heartbeat of our work.*

The research resonates with many of the discussions examined in this piece. The authors examine the policy churn and impact of austerity as a background to their work. A crucial and persuasive conclusion is:

*FE leadership is a key focus for educational research*

*because of the model of leadership and governance that has largely dominated the sector since incorporation. We would describe this model of leadership as being characteristic of neoliberal and corporate interpretations of the role. In the early post incorporation years, the role was positioned and interpreted as leading on the introduction of 'business cultures' into FE.*

They further note that in recent years:

*It is feasible to read the focus of senior leadership as having shifted from ensuring the institutional efficiency of delivery to the ability to manage the decline brought about by a steady withdrawal of financial resources it is feasible to read the focus of senior leadership as having shifted from ensuring the institutional efficiency of delivery to the ability to manage the decline brought about by a steady withdrawal of financial resources.*

On the continuing debate as to whether the new breed of CEO should have a college background, they come down firmly in favour of the teaching route:

*Today, it is not uncommon to find college CEOs with backgrounds in business and economics rather than education. The extent to which this has brought about improvements to teaching and learning or even had benefits in terms of financial stability is questionable.*

Despite the business rhetoric and posturings of the FE Commissioner, the authors sense, in their close examination of practice across the three colleges of this study, that *leadership is the notion of leadership as a shared practice and collective responsibility*. Leadership should not something that is done to you, it is at its best an energy that flows through an entire institution. The research is fascinating in that it gets right inside the nature of what is described elsewhere as distributed or facilitative leadership. This interpretation is supported by a comprehensive literature, which encompasses not only critical scholarly texts, but also an impressive range of grey literature on

current FE leadership trends.

The case studies are detailed and perceptive, with some delightful quotations. The remark, *All you keep doing is weighing the pig instead of fattening it! We need to do things differently*, so neatly encapsulates a culture of oppressive accountability that gets in the way of genuine improvement. The granularity of these case studies, as the authors track the iteration between leadership and student learning, gets deep into what makes a college tick and is more detailed and astute than is possible within the resources allocated to an Ofsted inspection. There are outstanding exemplars of critical evaluation, which are not shy about giving penetrating censure. One of the case studies depicts a college that has grown beyond the resources and capacity of its senior team to lead. It has become the victim of austerity, with:

*an emphasis on a 'bums-on-seats' pressure to recruit. In addition, the conflation of 'good' retention figures and good teaching and learning is problematic. The syllogism that retaining students equates to good teaching and learning is a product of a dysfunctional funding system.*

In this case study, leadership has become remote, obsessed by the need to attend to the needs of an antagonistic accountability regime:

*There were spaces in which reflection could take place, but their value went unrecognised within the college as they were institutionally marginalised and locally determined. The SLT's failure to recognise and support these spaces for collegial reflection is a key finding as it represents a missed opportunity.*

This is a conclusion that all leaders of massively expanded colleges should bear in mind, and many clearly do:

*The case study data reinforced the premise that the improvement of teaching and learning occurs first and foremost at the local level.*

Given the depth of this research, the 'implications and recommendations' should be carefully considered. The report recommends a model of leadership based on fundamental trust and mutual synergy between the senior leadership team, middle management and staff. They call for dedicated time to be devoted to improvement. Improvements in teaching and learning need to be grounded in local contexts. Leadership approaches to improving teaching and learning need to actively involve those that teach. The senior leader should be visible. Staff should not be deterred from experimentation. Leaders should show an orientation towards the future. FE providers need to construct a long-term narrative.

*Improving teaching and learning is about creating an environment in which collegial interaction can flourish.*

This research reinforces the view that colleges are strong when they emphasise localness, when they occupy their space, when they have their part in the community narrative.

# AFTERWORD

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The Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) seeks to strengthen and support the leadership of thinking in the further education and skills sector. In pursuing this, FETL continues to support research in to the wider thinking of the leadership of learner self-fulfilment and transitions in to work: the drivers, the governance and the leadership of the sector.

The research projects described here represent a mature phase in FETL's support for the leadership of thinking in this space. It demonstrates how the nature of leadership in the sector has permeated the wider social, demographic and economic context in which the sector is embedded. Colleges are becoming anchors in their spaces, from which social, civic and economic necessities can draw strength.

The leader in further education has to be sensitive to the spaces they are in, responding to frequent changes in policy, tight assessment regimes, changing employment patterns, new generations of qualifications, and diverse employer needs. In their localities colleges are an essential part of a wider system.

The first *Crossing Boundaries* noted that, in order to fulfil their role, college leaders have to move out of their comfort spheres and cross many boundaries. The studies described here demonstrate that in so doing they permeate the spaces in which they are located.

FETL has fulfilled its role in supporting the leadership of that thinking. Each piece of research is an interesting investigation in to an aspect of leadership. But now FETL has achieved a critical mass, whereby the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The sector is indebted to FETL for increasing our understanding of skills ecosystems, collaborative stakeholder relationships, boundary-crossing practices and the collaborative leadership of local and regional space.

**Paul Grainger** is Co-Director of the Centre for Post-14 Education and Work, and Head of Enterprise for the Department of Education, Practice and Society at University College London Institute of Education. He is a member of the G20 Task Force on the Future of Work.



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**Website: [www.fetl.org.uk](http://www.fetl.org.uk)**

**Email: [enquiries@fetl.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@fetl.org.uk)**

** [@FETforL](https://twitter.com/FETforL)**