



REMEMBERED THINKING...

– ON FURTHER EDUCATION AND LEADING

ABOUT FETL

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.
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FETL is an independent charity and think tank established to develop leadership in further education, particularly leadership of thought.

We provide research grants, fellowships and other opportunities to think, learn and do, in order to build the evidence needed to change policy and develop practice in a sector which is heavily under-researched and frequently misunderstood.

Our small team works with partners to ensure our £5.5 million five-year budget is best spent to develop further education in the UK. We take further education and skills to encompass independent training providers, community learning providers and colleges of all kinds, excluding schools and universities.

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LOYAL TO THE FUTURE

DAME RUTH SILVER

Further education is a Rubik's cube of a thing, adept at dealing with colourful twists, turns and about-turns in policies, purses, politicians and partners. This is how leadership life is lived when you work in FE and Skills, the adaptive layer of the English education system.

Schools, quite rightly, are compulsory, and protected by the law. Universities are selective, quite rightly, and protected by the Queen via royal charter. FE has none of those protections, is available to serve and, so, is the first place to which governments, of all colours, turn when they have to make quick changes with direct impact. This sector is much more accessible to changes in the political weather and is much more sensitively located in relation to the shifting social and economic environment. Its leaders are required to deliver continuous, sometimes rapid, change, to think differently, and for themselves, as society and the economy shift and our communities seek to adapt. Not all do it well, or even adequately, but the best are brilliant at it. Think of the swift move in the 1990s from delivering apprenticeships to developing social inclusion in a time of high unemployment – done and dusted within a year, though with high costs and known casualties. Today, the sector is engaged in a modern version of the nineties change, this time in reverse, and developing the next generation of itself. So it is in our world and thus is our mutable nature. Leading this mutability and mutuality requires a particular set of capabilities and knowledge.

This sector has a dual mission: to widen participation both into educational life and onwards into economic life. It is staffed by dual professionals – people who are, for example, both engineers and educators. That is true elsewhere, to a degree, but it is truer of further education than it is of any other sector. To add to the complexity, the sector has two delivery clans, in its FE colleges and its independent,

private providers. Unsurprisingly, given this plurality, the machinery of governance, control and accountability is complex – the detail confuses politicians, who, on the whole, did not arrive via the FE route, and policymakers – but, for the most part, it works, to one degree or another, and, when it works well, it is a beautiful thing.

A simple phrase locates the sector for me: it is *loyal to the future*. The sector abounds with stories about the golden age of further education, but it's never been like that. The sector is imperfect, variable in both quality and mission. And it has never remained the same for long. Direct comparisons, therefore, are of questionable validity. It's the very nature of further education to change and to continuously redefine and rethink itself. That is not to say it is wrong to look back. Far from it. Being loyal to the future depends on understanding where we have come from and why. That is, in part, the rationale for this book. But we need too to interrogate the past, to see what use we can make of it. We also need to look elsewhere and everywhere as we move forward to new and emergent agendas and contexts. There is little point in looking back simply to admire, misty-eyed, what went before. There are, I suspect, two kinds of folk around us: those who long for the past and those who desire a future. We, at FETL, are firmly of the latter camp.

The demands and commands placed on further education have always changed, and further education has always responded, as best it understood them. From its origins in the mechanics' institutes and the workers' education movement of Victorian times, colleges have travelled a long road, through local authority control to incorporation, to the new freedoms and responsibilities conferred by the Conservative-Liberal coalition in England. For a time, there was a great deal of money in the sector but the cost was choice, a *de facto* deincorporation, if you like, with the sector's mission firmly set by central government. Little attention was given to the experience or expertise of practitioners, and that was echoed in the lack of time allowed for thinking about the job of teaching and learning – and leading it. Now, there is less money available – some cuts have been brutal – but there is greater freedom to respond intelligently to local need and

communities – a *de facto* reincorporation. The current challenge for the sector's leaders is to ensure they respond with learning both for short-term market need and long-term public good, and build provision which is fit for purpose, fit for context, fit for phase and fit for place.

Political interest in the sector remains acute and expectations of what it can deliver are higher than ever, despite diminishing resources. Yet it is still poorly comprehended. FETL itself begins with the hypothesis that the further education sector is under-understood, under-conceptualised, under-researched and under-theorised. The joy, yes joy, of further education and its peoples is that it is so resilient, so adaptable, so fleet of foot. We are the thinking-doers of the education system. But while that is a significant strength, doing so many things, often well, makes us hard to describe or define, and that can make it difficult for the many new ministers, who generally have no experience of the sector, to understand us: we are the place of their apprenticeships in their officership of state. They know schools and universities, and they know the world of work, but they have very little idea about us. Yet they can change our purpose and give us no notice of that change; offer no development investment and still criticise us when things go wrong. There's unintended injustice in that: we have work to do.

We have to do what we do better, and we can. That is the thinking behind FETL and it is the thinking which has inspired this publication. Not all providers of FE and Skills have been 'loyal to the future', not all leaders have been prepared to face and shape change or to play a part in building the future of the sector. We have not always been assertive enough. Time to change. We want to contribute to a better way of knowing and talking about what we do, to lead thinking about the sector and its place in the overall system. We must do better at talking not only to politicians, so that they see the value in what we do, support it and deploy us well, but also, and more importantly, to and for the rising generations of the sector's professionals. For that to happen we must be better able to describe ourselves and to make the clearer case for how important we are.

In further education we honour the ordinary: ordinary people, the jobs they do that ease our everyday lives and the aspirations they have. If we honour the practitioners and their queries and their wisdom, and give them a chance to think about what they do, then we will become better at explaining ourselves and taking a position on why we matter. It is, in an important sense, about the matter of our own learning. The sector has bright, committed people. You don't work in this sector unless it resonates with you, unless you know it is important. We are seen as the doers, and we are, but we are more. We need to capture and utilise what the sector knows, bring it to the surface, and give sector colleagues the time and opportunity to think that they have never had before.

Doing is not enough and thinking is not enough: each is impoverished without the presence of the other.

Dame Ruth Silver is the founding President of FETL. She served as Principal of Lewisham College for 17 years until 2009 and became chair of the Learning and Skills Improvement Service in 2010. She is co-chair of the Skills Commission.

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In 1994 the Further Education Funding Council set up the Widening Participation Committee to lead a review into how best to encourage more people to participate and succeed in further education. It was chaired by Helena Kennedy QC (now Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws). Her final report – Learning Works (1997) – argued that learning was the common foundation for economic prosperity and social cohesion, and offered practical strategies to widen – rather than simply increase – participation. All the evidence, the report noted, ‘suggests that it is those who are already well qualified who go on to earn more and to demand and get more learning; many of those who fail the first time round never make up the lost ground, educationally or economically’. It called on government to create a national strategy for post-16 learning to support the aspiration that all should achieve at Level 3 (A-level or equivalent) and to reinforce this by establishing new national learning targets. The committee saw the opportunity to achieve at Level 3 as the essential basis for the creation of a self-perpetuating learning society and argued that public funding should be redistributed towards those with less success in earlier learning.

EXCERPT FROM *LEARNING WORKS: WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN FURTHER EDUCATION*

Helena Kennedy QC

Public values and the market

"Education must be at the heart of any inspired project for regeneration in Britain. It should be a springboard for the revitalisation that our communities so urgently need. However, in all the political debates, it is the economic rationale for increasing participation in education which has been paramount. Prosperity depends upon there being a vibrant economy, but an economy which regards its own success as the highest good is a dangerous one. Justice and equity must also have their claim upon the arguments for educational growth."

"Further education is everything that does not happen in schools or universities".

This was the throwaway definition I was given when, as a member of the widening participation committee, I sought to circumscribe the parameters of our enquiry. Given the productive relationships which exist between colleges and schools, and the growing opportunities for colleges and higher education institutions to work together, it became clear that even this rough and ready guidance missed the mark. Defining further education exhaustively would be God's own challenge

because it is such a large and fertile section of the education world. Yet, despite the formidable role played by further education, it is the least understood and celebrated part of the learning tapestry.

Further education suffers because of prevailing British attitudes. Not only does there remain a very carefully calibrated hierarchy of worthwhile achievement, which has clearly established routes and which privileges academic success well above any other accomplishment, but there is also an appalling ignorance amongst decision-makers and opinion-formers about what goes on in further education. It is so alien to their experience.

Further education's reach is extensive. It has been at the heart of vocational training in a multiplicity of forms – full-time study, part-time study, evening class and day release, in the workplace and out of it. It is the first choice for many young people at 16. Adult education classes have meant added enrichment for many who have already benefited from education and see continuous learning as one of life's pleasures. Further education has been an alternative route to success for many young people who have foundered in the school system, frequently providing another avenue to university education.

It is further education which has invariably given second chances to those who were forced by necessity to make unfulfilling choices. It said 'try again' to those who were labelled as failures and who had decided education was not for the likes of them. It is here, above all, that opportunities have been provided for those caught in the cycle of low-skilled jobs and unemployment who want to better themselves; here, that so many can train or retrain; here, that there is work with refugees and members of immigrant groups to acquire English language skills, or with ex-offenders to facilitate rehabilitation, or with underachievers to fulfil their potential. It is because the achievements in further education are so rarely lauded that we have failed to recognise further education's potential as a vital engine not only of economic renewal but of social cohesion.

A skills revolution

Like most parts of the education firmament, the further education sector has gone through a period of dramatic change. The late eighties saw a political drive to end what was perceived as 'producer' dominance in education, substituting for it the principles of the market and competition.

There was also a clear decision to reduce the status and powers of local authorities; further education was taken out of local education authority control and the Further Education Funding Council was created. Over a five-year period, there was a profound shift in the control of education from local to central government. These developments went hand-in-hand with a growing recognition by employers and trade unions that a quantum leap was needed in Britain's performance in education and training. Britain was sliding inexorably down the international league tables auguring a low-skill, low-pay economy by the year 2000, unless a skills revolution took place. In an increasingly competitive world, people were recognised as the only source of sustainable competitive advantage; the potential of all our people had to be tapped.

In keeping with the spirit of the times, the Further Education Funding Council placed growth at the heart of its funding methodology and the whole machinery was designed to stimulate expansion.

Growth has indeed taken place at an impressive pace and it is to the credit of colleges and other providers that they rose to the challenge which was set. Many colleges have relished their autonomy, and have proved they can be entrepreneurial in the running of colleges and inventive in their pursuit of new students. There has been a significant increase in efficiency.

However, there is also growing disquiet that the new ethos has encouraged colleges not just to be businesslike but to perform as if they were businesses.

Since funding has been related to successful outcomes, namely qualifications attained by students, there has been a tendency for too many colleges to go in pursuit of the students who are most likely to succeed. There has been growth, but the students recruited have not come from a sufficiently wide cross-section of the community and there is concern that initiatives to include more working-class people, more disaffected young people, more women, more people from ethnic minority groups are being discontinued because they fall through the gaps in the system. Attracting and keeping those for whom learning is a daunting experience is hard work and financially unrewarding. The effort and resources required to support such students on courses receives insufficient recognition in the current funding system.

Competition has been interpreted by some colleges as a spur to go it alone. Other colleges are seen as rivals for students rather than as potential collaborators with whom good practice and a strategic overview can be shared and developed.

This kind of competition in education has often operated to the detriment of the sector and potential learners. As George Soros, the international financier, put it in a recent essay in *Atlantic Monthly*, when expressing his fears for the capitalist world, 'Too much competition and too little co-operation can cause intolerable inequities and instabilities.'

In fact, many sophisticated business enterprises now work with their competitors in establishing market share and quality products, as car manufacturers did in the creation and promotion of their 'people carriers'.

The search for common purpose

However, in the rush away from planning and the heavy hand of the state, no clear strategic overview was developed, nor any statement of an overarching common purpose made.

The way of avoiding destructive competition in the public sector is to bring people together around a clear and urgent common purpose. A process of continuous discussion creates alignments and collaborations as the sensible answer to the challenge.

The franchising of provision has shown its potential to reach out to many who have previously been excluded or missed out or who want to advance their skills. Indeed, franchising to community organisations has already had some real success. However, franchising has also been troubled by a failure to recognise that following demand, in true business style, is not the only criterion when funding comes from the public purse. Responsibility to that fund has to underlie public service decisions. Questions have to be asked about the relative priority accorded to public subsidy of employers' job-related training at a time when money is so desperately needed in pursuit of other learning gains. There are other ways of supporting and fostering employers' contributions to learning.

For the overwhelming majority of colleges, the driving force for excellence remains the provision of a non-discriminatory service to all sections of the community. The hallmark of a college's success is, as it should be, public trust, satisfaction of the 'stakeholders' and esteem rather than profitability. These colleges do not see their students as 'consumers', or learning merely as 'training'. They see education as being more than the acquisition of knowledge and skills. In a system so caught up in what is measurable, we can forget that learning is also about problem-solving, learning to learn, acquiring the capability for intelligent choice in exercising personal responsibility. It is a weapon against poverty. It is the route to participation and active citizenship.

These values are not a substitute for good management, efficiency and fine teaching, all of which should be imperative in an effective institution. However, public service values, which have been the pulse of further education, are finding little articulation in the new language of the market.

A well-run, private-sector business continuously finds new means of being more profitable. It will aim to sell what brings in most money. It is bad business practice to subsidise that which is unprofitable. However, many colleges want to include activities which, although unprofitable in the strict sense, are of value to the community. They know they can play a part in drawing back to the social embrace many who are disaffected. They want genuine open access to education and training for all sections of the community. They want to underpin employers' long-term competitive capability by assisting in the skilling of the workforce.

The 'market' may not be predisposed to support and pay for such educational activities, but they demonstrate the public service ethos of the colleges. It is this ethos which helps to earn public trust, esteem and, potentially, public support.

A new synthesis

All the public services – the National Health Service, social and education services – are struggling in this time of change to forge a new synthesis, a blend which is true to the public service ethos with its commitment to 'the public good', but at the same time exploits business as a fruitful model of effectiveness.

Finding that synergy in the right balance is one of the 'wicked' problems facing educators; to achieve it the purpose of education and the values which underpin it have to be made clear.

Education must be at the heart of any inspired project for regeneration in Britain. It should be a springboard for the revitalisation that our communities so urgently need. However, in all the political debates, it is the economic rationale for increasing participation in education which has been paramount. Prosperity depends upon there being a vibrant economy, but an economy which regards its own success as the highest

good is a dangerous one. Justice and equity must also have their claim upon the arguments for educational growth. In a social landscape where there is a growing gulf between those who have and those who have not, the importance of social cohesion cannot be ignored.

Making social cohesion a prominent goal of education also has a powerful rationale in economic terms. There has been a growing acceptance by economists of the centrality of human and social capital in economic success. Today, capital is embodied increasingly in the knowledge and skills of human beings rather than in factories, machinery and plant. There is also growing recognition internationally that economic success is inextricably bound up with social factors. The American sociologists, James Coleman and Robert Putnam, and the political analyst Francis Fukuyama all argue that law, contract and economic rationality provide a necessary but insufficient basis for the stability and prosperity of postindustrial societies; these must also be leavened with reciprocity, moral obligation, duty towards community and trust. It is this 'social capital' which has a large and measurable economic value. A nation's well-being, as well as its ability to compete, is conditioned by a single pervasive cultural characteristic – the level of social capital inherent in the society.

When people trust government to act in their interests and for the common good, they themselves are happy to give something in return. When people join together in common endeavour, they create the subsoil in which growth and development can take place.

Education has always been a source of social vitality and the more people we can include in the community of learning, the greater the benefits to us all. The very process involves interaction between people; it is the means by which the values and wisdom of a society are shared and transmitted across the generations. Education strengthens the ties which bind people, takes the fear out of difference and encourages tolerance. It helps people to see what makes the world tick and the ways in which they, individually and together, can make a difference. It is the likeliest means of creating a modern, well-skilled workforce, reducing levels of crime, and creating participating citizens.

Inequities of funding

... There is public consensus that education needs more money and that the quantum has to be increased. But, in the clamour for funds, further education's claims have been sidelined. The education of the nation's children is obviously a foremost consideration. However, serious inequity exists in the financing of post-16 education.

Only a quarter of the five million post-16 learners in England attend universities. Yet two thirds of the post-school education budget is spent on the universities.

Even with the exciting expansion of further and higher education, the children of the working class have not been the real beneficiaries. Children from my own class background are still not participating. Sixty-two per cent of university students come from social classes I and II. One per cent come from social class V.

Investment in further education is one of the most cost-effective ways of tackling the cumulative effects of learning failure. It is undoubtedly the best way to remedy past deficiencies.

Yet the shocking fact is that support for students is heavily weighted towards those who personally go on to benefit most from their education and whose family circumstances are most favourable to continuing in education. One fifth of the households which have the highest incomes in our country receive more in educational subsidies than those forming either of the bottom two fifths.

Like the trickle-down theory of economics, there is a trickle-down theory of education which relies upon the notion that concentrating the bulk of educational investment on our top cohorts produces an excellence which permeates the system. For centuries, this thinking has blighted not just the British economy, but the whole of British life. It demands an urgent reappraisal.

Helena Kennedy, Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws, is a barrister, broadcaster and Labour member of the House of Lords. She is President of the Helena Kennedy Foundation, which provides bursaries, mentoring and support to disadvantaged students from further education to help them move onto higher education and employment. She has chaired a number of important national commissions, in addition to the committee on widening participation in further education.

SOLVING 'GOD'S OWN PROBLEM'

A response by Carole Stott

I still have my copy of *Learning Works*, and remember well the thrill of reading a report that chimed so accurately with the values and aspirations, as well as the reality, of further education in 1997.

Learning Works was the report of the Further Education Funding Council's Widening Participation Committee, established in 1994 and chaired by Helena Kennedy QC. The report's recommendations were promoted as the core of a vital national effort across government and its agencies to widen and increase access to quality education and training post-16.

The committee's work began soon after the 'incorporation' of further education colleges in 1993. Incorporation took colleges out of local authority control and was intended to free them up to respond and innovate, while opening up the opportunity for a coherent national strategy for post-16 learning that would transform the economic and social wellbeing of the UK. In the run up to incorporation many college leaders had campaigned for further education to be at the heart of a properly co-ordinated post-16 system. Campaigners viewed colleges as an immense and under-utilised resource: one that was undervalued, neglected, uncoordinated and under-resourced.

Fragmented and elitist

In a context where the UK was seen to be falling significantly behind its competitors, which had mass or universal patterns of further and higher education and well-established systems of vocational education and training, the UK 'system' was widely regarded as fragmented and elitist.

Further education wanted a larger and more central role, with more equity, access and parity with other parts of the system. Campaigners called for FE to be properly supported, and its attributes and capabilities harnessed to tackle a desperate need for improved education and training post-16.

It was into this arena that Helena Kennedy's report was launched. The report's opening remarks on FE echo down the intervening years. She called defining FE 'God's own challenge' and described it as the 'least understood and celebrated part of the learning tapestry' that suffered not only from the ignorance of decision-makers but also from prevailing attitudes that favoured the purely academic higher education route to success above all else.

Much of this will sound alarmingly familiar to many working in FE today. However, we have also undergone huge changes in the past 20 years: changes in the labour market and the skills of the workforce; in technologies and work structures; and, of course, in our education and training system and in FE itself. So how should we reflect on the messages in *Learning Works* today? How valid is it as a blueprint for further education in the first quarter of the twenty-first century?

Values ring true

I believe that many in FE would think that the general vision of *Learning Works* stands and is as valid today as it was in 1997.

The values it espouses still ring true, and while we may no longer hear the phrase 'widening participation' as a mantra for FE, the belief that FE provides inclusive opportunities for all society, including those who haven't thrived in the school system, remains just as valid in 2015. However, FE, and colleges in particular, have grown in stature and confidence since 1997. They have largely been successful in maintaining a public service ethos and commitment to 'public good' while exploiting effective business models: one of the 'wicked problems' identified in Helena Kennedy's report.

The commitment to serving local communities is strong among colleges and adult community providers, and colleges' place in their local communities and economies is stronger and clearer. Reports such as *A Dynamic Nucleus: Colleges at the heart of local communities*, the outcome of the Independent Commission on Colleges in their Communities, and *It's about work: Excellent adult vocational teaching and learning*, published in 2013 by the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning, helped to give FE renewed confidence and clarity in purpose and vision.

The 1997 vision of FE at the heart of regeneration and as the 'engine for growth' is as crucial and as valid today as it was then.

The pendulum swings

In 1997 the challenge was to develop a strong national system, with FE at its heart.

In truth, we have oscillated between a locally planned and controlled system (pre-1993) and a highly centralised, nationally planned and controlled system (as under the Learning and Skills Council). We now have a system in which colleges (in England at least) have autonomy but operate within national skills strategies and funding rules, which drive certain responses and behaviours. The pendulum swings from national to local, from top-down planned to bottom-up demanded. Currently the pendulum is swinging towards the latter, with a momentum of support gathering behind calls for localism and greater devolution of powers. There is a danger in all of this, however, that if the pendulum swings back too far we lose much of the gain achieved by freeing colleges from local control and enabling them to innovate and invest to adapt and respond to need.

The OECD's 2013 report, *A Skills Beyond School Review of England*, described 'entrepreneurial and flexible' FE colleges as a strength of the system, arguing that '[t]he relative autonomy of FE colleges allows them to respond to student demands in innovative ways'.

This strength has been wrought from a tension between a national system of further education and skills set in a context of national skills strategies and national funding models, and independent local colleges with their own leadership and the freedom to innovate and build new business models that can respond rapidly to changing needs. Imposing more control, whether locally or centrally, would jeopardise this entrepreneurial spirit. However, more local and regional influence over skills should enable colleges to be even more responsive. It should be a driver to developing new kinds of partnership and new models of provision. Colleges are already close to business and employers but more is needed if they are to meet the challenges ahead. They will need to use their knowledge and expertise to become key strategic partners in leading and shaping local growth through skills. This should not be about taking control away from colleges but about harnessing it alongside the strengthened influence of other key partners locally.

Higher technical skills

The OECD report also pointed to one of the big challenges facing the UK economy and skills: the need to fill the huge gap in higher technical and professional skills.

FE is perfectly placed to address this challenge, if the mechanics of the system adapt to allow it to do so, and if FE adapts to meet the challenge. *Learning Works* called for a focus on achievement at Level 3. The new context calls for focus on Levels 3, 4 and 5. The task and challenge is to ensure that focus at these levels remains on vocational teaching and learning and does not drift, in the usual British way, towards the academic.

A challenge for FE is how to develop new forms of partnership, new and different relationships and new business models, to support its role in developing the higher technical and professional skills that our economy now needs. For some within the system it will also mean hard choices about what not to do (or what to do less of) as some colleges in particular move towards greater specialisation. This,

in turn, creates the need for more cooperation and harder forms of collaboration across the system in order to make the system effective and wholly responsive to the range and diversity of needs. 'Hard collaboration' is likely to include developing and refining effective shared outcome agreements across a locality or region, as we have already seen developing in parts of the UK.

Of course, this focus on higher levels raises the question of curriculum and provision at lower levels. It is essential that the system adapts to design opportunities for progression to the higher level. Sadly, a perception that lower-level work is what FE does still lingers amongst some decision-makers and opinion-formers, and is damaging to the vision of what FE is and can be. *Learning Works* recommended 'Pathways for Learning', providing routes into and through learning. Such pathways are still needed and this means ensuring that lower-level vocational skills and achievement are not a dead-end option, leading only to a cycle of low-level jobs. Rather, they must offer real progression to and through the higher technical and professional routes that we must now develop, thereby offering genuine throughput to the highly valued and rewarding technical and professional jobs that the economy needs. This requires serious attention to the vocational curriculum at lower levels in order to ensure that it genuinely prepares people for jobs and for progression. Greater clarity about what is needed in lower-level vocational provision in order to support real careers and progression is needed. This will almost certainly be different in different curriculum areas.

The parity that FE and vocational learning has so long called for will not be achieved if the vocational is viewed only as lower-level skills with occasional bridges to the academic golden route. FE must be about careers, not just jobs. Only then will it genuinely be valued in its own right and recognised as the first-choice route that it should be for many, whatever their level of achievement in the school system.

New vision

This new vision for FE should be as the route to successful technical and professional careers. This gives us a solution to 'God's own challenge' of defining FE, or, at least, of defining FE colleges.

Instead of 'further education is everything that does not happen in schools or universities', we should celebrate that 'further education does what schools and universities cannot do', recognising FE colleges' unique and distinctive place alongside schools and universities. FE is the place that provides the common ground and the connection between the world of education and the world of work, firmly grounded in the needs of the community and of the individuals it serves.

This does not mean that higher-level technical is all that FE does. It does not mean that adult and community learning and 'second chance' learning do not have their place in colleges and in the wider system. But it would be damaging for FE to be viewed solely as a second-chance system. It is also a sad truth that the adult and second-chance provision, and the examples of informal learning and adults engaging in the learning process to improve 'their self-worth', as described in *Learning Works*, are much rarer now than they were in 1997. Adult budgets have suffered greatly in recent years and funding for adult and community learning remains flat, and has only survived at all because of the support and commitment of two key UK government ministers, and the heavy lobbying and evidence of its value provided by the sector. There is a clear view from many in Whitehall that learning for self-worth is a luxury this nation cannot now afford.

It is clear that *Learning Works'* vision of a 'learning nation' was not followed through by the New Labour government, and was certainly not well enough established or embedded to survive the pressures brought by the financial crash. Helena Kennedy described this vision and purpose as:

...the means by which the values and wisdom of a society are shared and transmitted across the generations. Education strengthens the ties which bind people, takes the fear out of difference and encourages tolerance. It helps people to see what makes the world tick and the ways in which they, individually and together, can make a difference. It is the likeliest means of creating a modern, well-skilled workforce, reducing levels of crime, and creating participating citizens.

This, surely, remains valid, particularly as the UK seeks to recover and rebuild from a major economic recession, facing the prospect of increasing divisions in society and very serious challenges to its fundamental values as a society and nation.

We need to think much more seriously about how we provide entry into learning opportunities for everyone; how learning works to play a key role in local regeneration; and how we tackle under-achievement and low aspirations which are sometimes passed down through generations – a key purpose of family learning which has suffered greatly under the recent funding regime. FE can do this. Different parts of the FE family have different strengths and specialisations, and within this diversity we need a vision for an FE that caters for all parts of our communities and their needs.

The new vision for FE places it as a leader and crucial partner for growth through skills, providing learning for people to develop successful and rewarding technical and professional careers, and learning that works for and with the communities it serves.

Carole Stott MBE is Chair of the Board of the Association of Colleges and Chair of City of Bath College. She is also Chair of Find a Future, which governs and directs the Skills Show, the UK's largest showcase for vocational training, skills and careers.

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The vision and spirit of Learning Works was warmly endorsed by David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment of the newly elected Labour government. Blunkett established a National Advisory Group for Education and Lifelong Learning to advise on a new strategy for adult learning. The group's first report – Learning for the Twenty-First Century – drew heavily on Learning Works in urging the development of 'a new learning culture, a culture of lifelong learning for all' to meet the challenges of economic, social and technological change. Its calls for a 'learning society' were taken up in Labour's 1998 Green Paper, The Learning Age. The government, wrote David Blunkett in his memorable foreword, was putting 'learning at the heart of its ambition'. The paper launched a number of significant innovations, including the University for Industry, individual learning accounts, the Adult and Community Learning Fund and the Trade Union Learning Fund.

EXCERPT FROM *THE LEARNING AGE: A RENAISSANCE FOR A NEW BRITAIN*

David Blunkett MP

An agenda for a new age

"As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation ... That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings."

Learning is the key to prosperity – for each of us as individuals, as well as for the nation as a whole. Investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twenty-first century. This is why the Government has put learning at the heart of its ambition. Our first policy paper addressed school standards. This Green Paper sets out for consultation how learning throughout life will build human capital by encouraging the acquisition of knowledge and skills and emphasising creativity and imagination. The fostering of an enquiring mind and the love of learning are essential to our future success.

To achieve stable and sustainable growth, we will need a well-educated, well-equipped and adaptable labour force. To cope with rapid change and the challenge of the information and

communication age, we must ensure that people can return to learning throughout their lives. We cannot rely on a small elite, no matter how highly educated or highly paid. Instead, we need the creativity, enterprise and scholarship of all our people.

As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings.

To realise our ambition, we must all develop and sustain a regard for learning at whatever age. For many people this will mean overcoming past experiences which have put them off learning. For others it will mean taking the opportunity, perhaps for the first time, to recognise their own talent, to discover new ways of learning and to see new opportunities opening up. What was previously available only to the few can, in the century ahead, be something which is enjoyed and taken advantage of by the many.

New opportunities, second chances

That is why this Green Paper encourages adults to enter and re-enter learning at every point in their lives, whatever their experience at school.

There are many ways in which we can all take advantage of new opportunities:

- as parents we can play our part in encouraging, supporting and raising the expectations of our children by learning alongside them;

- as members of the workforce we can take on the challenge of learning in and out of work; and
- as citizens we can balance the rights we can expect from the state, with the responsibilities of individuals for their own future, sharing the gains and the investment needed.

Two initiatives will exemplify our approach:

- individual learning accounts which will enable men and women to take responsibility for their own learning with support from both Government and employers; and
- the University for Industry which will offer access to a learning network to help people deepen their knowledge, update their skills and gain new ones.

We are fortunate in this country to have a great tradition of learning. We have inherited the legacy of the great self-help movements of the Victorian industrial communities. Men and women, frequently living in desperate poverty, were determined to improve themselves and their families. They did so through the creation of libraries, study at workers' institutes, through the pioneering efforts of the early trade unions, at evening classes, through public lectures and by correspondence courses. Learning enriched their lives and they, in turn, enriched the whole of society.

The Learning Age will be built on a renewed commitment to self-improvement and on a recognition of the enormous contribution learning makes to our society. Learning helps shape the values which we pass on to each succeeding generation. Learning supports active citizenship and democracy, giving men and women the capacity to provide leadership in their communities. As President John F. Kennedy once put it: 'Liberty without learning is always in peril and learning without liberty is always in vain.'

The information age

... We are in a new age – the age of information and of global competition. Familiar certainties and old ways of doing things are disappearing.

The types of jobs we do have changed as have the industries in which we work and the skills they need. At the same time, new opportunities are opening up as we see the potential of new technologies to change our lives for the better. We have no choice but to prepare for this new age in which the key to success will be the continuous education and development of the human mind and imagination.

Over a generation we have seen a fundamental change in the balance between skilled and unskilled jobs in the industrialised world. Since the 1960s, employment in manufacturing has fallen from one in three of the workforce to under one in five. This has been mirrored by a huge rise in jobs in services which now account for over two-thirds of all workers; more people today work in film and television than in car manufacturing. There are three million self-employed and 6.5 million part-time workers, and women make up nearly half the workforce compared with less than a third 50 years ago.

The Industrial Revolution was built on capital investment in plant and machinery, skills and hard physical labour. British inventors pushed forward the frontiers of technology and our manufacturers turned their inventions into wealth. We built the world's first calculator, jet engine, computer and television. Our history shows what we are capable of, but we must now apply the same qualities of skill and invention to a fresh challenge.

The information and knowledge-based revolution of the twenty-first century will be built on a very different foundation – investment in the intellect and creativity of people. The microchip and fibre optic cable are today what electricity and the steam engine were to the nineteenth century. The United Kingdom is also pioneering this new

age, combining ingenuity, enterprise, design and marketing skills. We are world leaders in information and communication technologies and bio-technology.

To continue to compete, we must equip ourselves to cope with the enormous economic and social change we face, to make sense of the rapid transformation of the world, and to encourage imagination and innovation. We will succeed by transforming inventions into new wealth, just as we did a hundred years ago. But unlike then, everyone must have the opportunity to innovate and to gain reward – not just in research laboratories, but on the production line, in design studios, in retail outlets, and in providing services.

The most productive investment will be linked to the best educated and best trained workforces, and the most effective way of getting and keeping a job will be to have the skills needed by employers. Our single greatest challenge is to equip ourselves for this new age with new and better skills, with knowledge and with understanding.

A culture of learning

... Our vision of the Learning Age is about more than employment. The development of a culture of learning will help to build a united society, assist in the creation of personal independence, and encourage our creativity and innovation.

Learning encompasses basic literacy to advanced scholarship. We learn in many different ways through formal study, reading, watching television, going on a training course, taking an evening class, at work, and from family and friends. In this consultation paper we use the word 'learning' to describe all of these.

This country has a great learning tradition. We have superb universities and colleges which help maintain our position as a world leader in technology, finance, design, manufacturing and the creative industries.

We want more people to have the chance to experience the richness of this tradition by participating in learning. We want all to benefit from the opportunities learning brings and to make them more widely available by building on this foundation of high standards and excellence.

For *individuals*:

- learning offers excitement and the opportunity for discovery. It stimulates enquiring minds and nourishes our souls. It takes us in directions we never expected, sometimes changing our lives. Learning helps create and sustain our culture. It helps all of us to improve our chances of getting a job and of getting on. Learning increases our earning power, helps older people to stay healthy and active, strengthens families and the wider community, and encourages independence. There are many people for whom learning has opened up, for the first time in their lives, the chance to explore art, music, literature, film, and the theatre, or to become creative themselves. Learning has enabled many people to help others to experience these joys too.

For *businesses*:

- learning helps them to be more successful by adding value and keeping them up-to-date. Learning develops the intellectual capital which is now at the centre of a nation's competitive strength. It provides the tools to manage industrial and technological change, and helps generate ideas, research and innovation. Because productivity depends on the whole workforce, we must invest in everyone.

For *communities*:

- learning contributes to social cohesion and fosters a sense of belonging, responsibility and identity. In communities affected by rapid economic change and industrial restructuring, learning builds local capacity to respond to this change.

For the nation:

- learning is essential to a strong economy and an inclusive society. In offering a way out of dependency and low expectation, it lies at the heart of the Government's welfare reform programme. We must bridge the 'learning divide' – between those who have benefited from education and training and those who have not – which blights so many communities and widens income inequality. The results are seen in the second and third generation of the same family being unemployed, and in the potential talent of young people wasted in a vicious circle of under-achievement, self-deprecation, and petty crime. Learning can overcome this by building self-confidence and independence.

Strengths and weaknesses

... The country's current learning 'scoreboard' shows strengths, but also some serious weaknesses.

A great strength is our universities which educate to degree and postgraduate level and set world-class standards. The UK is second only to the USA in the number of major scientific prizes awarded in the last five years. The proportion of graduates in the working population has almost doubled over a decade. Our research excellence is valued by many companies which choose to base their research capacity in the UK. A further strength is the existing commitment among many people to gaining qualifications. Fourteen million people have National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 2 (equivalent to five or more higher grade GCSEs).

Our weakness lies in our performance in basic and intermediate skills. Almost 30 per cent of young people fail to reach NVQ level 2 by the age of 19. Seven million adults have no formal qualifications at all; 21 million adults have not reached level 3 (equivalent to 2 A-levels), and more than one in five of all adults have poor literacy and numeracy skills ... [W]e lag behind France, Germany, the USA and Singapore in

the proportion of our workforce qualified to level 3. In the case of graduates, even though we have a high number, we need to encourage more of our highly qualified people to update their skills through continuing professional development.

... Meeting this challenge will require a quiet and sustained revolution in aspiration and achievement. It will begin with getting the foundations right in the home and at school... It will mean changing the culture in many homes and workplaces where learning is not seen as having any relevance. It is a social as well as an economic challenge.

The Government's role will be to help create a framework of opportunities for people to learn and to lift barriers that prevent them from taking up those opportunities. We cannot force anyone to learn – individuals must take that responsibility themselves – but we can help those who want to develop a thirst for knowledge. Together we can create a culture of self improvement and a love of learning where if people want to get on, their first instinct is to improve their skills and education.

David Blunkett has been a Labour Member of Parliament for Sheffield Brightside since 1987. Blind since birth, and growing up in a poor family in one of Sheffield's most deprived districts, he nevertheless became the youngest-ever councilor on Sheffield City Council at 22, in 1970. He went on to hold the posts of Education and Employment Secretary, Home Secretary, and Work and Pensions Secretary.

WE'RE GOOD BUT WE COULD BE BETTER

A response by Ian Ferguson

Re-reading David Blunkett's foreword to the 1998 *Learning Age Green Paper* I was reminded of how broadly scoped the ambitions of New Labour were, at least at the start. Its articulation of the importance of learning to our society is, to me, entirely valid and compelling. I will not dwell on it other than to endorse it and urge you, the reader, to use its articulation of the need as a backdrop to what follows.

Less positively, I was also reminded of how inadequately realised New Labour's early ambitions were. This was true not only in terms of developing a learning society, but across many other areas, notably Every Child Matters, but there are numerous other examples. That real world of implementation – the world in which policy visions stand or fall – will be my main focus. I will discuss four fundamental areas: schools, adult skills, the unemployed and disadvantaged, and learning for its own sake.

It starts at school

The key to creating a learning society in the UK is to improve pre-19 school, college and work-based learning outcomes, and to make that learning more relevant.

Across the board, even for the most academically gifted, the school system remains stubbornly blind to its duty to help create young people who have the 'starter pack' of skills necessary for both life and work. This includes numeracy, literacy, communications, personal awareness and, crucially, a positive attitude to themselves, to life and to work.

That said, most employers and the majority of young people are 'satisfied' with the qualifications diet of academic GCSEs and A-levels. However, the system still serves poorly those young people with a more practical bent. There is a danger that current reforms will not improve the situation, and could even make it worse. The implementation of Alison Wolf's vocational reforms is neither well formed nor well understood. The current apprenticeship reforms do not properly address the needs and aspirations of 16–19 year olds and may well lead to a reduction in the number of young apprentices rather than providing the impetus for the dramatic increase which young people need. Moves to raise the participation age still lack a solid plan to ensure 100 per cent participation. And there is too much retention persuasion being applied by schools and colleges – despite a significant proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) needing and wanting work-based learning programmes and employment. This imbalance and the lack of diversity in provision can prove fatal to the motivation and engagement in learning of those young people more suited to vocational study.

The system's most serious shortcoming – alongside inadequate or, in some cases, non-existent information, advice and guidance and careers education – is the poor support for that section of the pre-19 cohort who come from disadvantaged and disaffected backgrounds. This is a real barrier to the creation of a universal learning society. The education and social services systems are, quite simply, neither structured nor funded to provide a substitute for the family and parental support these young people lack but must have if they are to benefit fully from their education and, so, join the learning society. No doubt, the government will point to the Pupil Premium and other funding for the disadvantaged – but they are not nearly sufficient. My own judgement is that only schools, not local authorities, have anything like the capability of providing such broad support – but schools neither get the funding nor have the remit to do so.

In conclusion, we have a pretty good system in place for young people to move to adulthood feeling positive about their learning, but it needs to have more focus on life and work, and not just academic subjects,

and provide a more diverse and useful variety of programmes, in particular, vocational and occupational. There must also be a step change in provision for the disadvantaged.

The adult system is pretty good

Inevitably, in setting out its case for improvement, *The Learning Age* understated how good the situation was then. We do the same now.

My first contention is that the UK's credentials as a learning society are better than most people think, certainly for those adults who are employed (and some 94 per cent of the population is either employed or not actively seeking work). My second contention is that a considerable majority of employed adults are in jobs with which they are reasonably satisfied as meeting their needs and ambitions; and where both they and their employer are interested in their learning and development. They also, for the most part, feel able, when they are not at work, to pursue their personal and family interests. Furthermore, a considerable number of employed adults who do have desires and ambitions beyond their current job and employer, are actively seeking to acquire the required skills, either formally or informally, to achieve their ambition.

That is not to say that the situation cannot be improved. Although there is considerable good practice, there are still many – too many – employers who are not sufficiently interested in, and committed to, the training and skills development of their employees. It is close to a tragedy that, after a very good first few years, the impetus behind the Investors in People programme has diminished as far as it has. Also, while both employer organisations and the UK Commission for Education and Skills (UKCES) are committed to improving the overall training and skills development carried out by employers, both UKCES and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills remain too focused on government funding rather than on creating impetus and incentives aimed at improving the overall structure of the vast

majority of training which is, as it should be, employer organised and funded (apprenticeships are the shining example of employer training which gets the balance with state funding right).

For those in employment, but wanting to develop their skills and careers away from their current employer, there is a significant infrastructure of training and development programmes and qualifications, and of providers, including both colleges and private training organisations. What the current structure lacks is a well-recognised, expert and properly available information, advice and guidance service to help those either in a dilemma or uncertain of how to fulfil their desires and ambitions. Yes, lots of elements do exist, such as the National Careers Service – but, in truth, aspiring adults have to rely too much on their own motivation and initiative. Supporting individuals via publicly funded loans may be helpful, but it creates potential friction between employer and employee.

There remain too many myths and misconceptions about employer training and development, which I believe makes a huge contribution to the learning society. These include the notion that the only 'proper' training is formal training leading to a qualification, and the idea that investing in training leads to employees leaving for better jobs. In fact, not only do employers know the value of on-the-job training, to themselves and to their employees, they also, for the most part, appreciate that investing in training is an effective retention strategy which also leads to improved organisational performance. Another misconception is the idea that employers do not train and do not know what skills they need. This is plain nonsense.

The unemployed and disadvantaged

How good is our system at engaging adults who are unemployed or trapped in unsatisfactory employment and who live in badly disadvantaged circumstances? The answer has to be 'not very'.

How can we create a situation and system where those who lack the basic skills for employment are able to gain those skills, including the motivation to learn and perform in a job – and therefore join the learning society?

As with young people, many of the necessary building blocks are in place – but for us to be effective, as a society, in removing the scourge of disadvantage, including generation-to-generation disadvantage, we need a step change in structure and funding – and real political will, which appears sadly lacking. As much as we condemn New Labour for deficient implementation we must also condemn the Conservative-Liberal coalition for a lack of will.

The main building blocks to help remove disadvantage and unemployment are:

- the structure of social security, which is currently being significantly reformed;
- the overall work of the Department for Work and Pensions in reducing unemployment – and, in particular, the Work Programme which creates a results-based contract for providers; and
- the considerable infrastructure of Level 2 and pre-Level 2 courses to teach skills for employment, government-funded and delivered by colleges and other providers.

I believe that these can greatly help those people who have the motivation to get a job and develop the necessary skills – but they are not nearly sufficient for those in a more negative or troubled frame of mind.

If you believe, as I do, that the conditions in which many of those at the bottom of the economic ladder live are a social disgrace and that society has a duty to support these people to achieve something better, you will also believe that we have to challenge the lack of political will and commitment and put some of the building blocks in place, with learning playing a critical part.

It all starts, typically but necessarily, with a step change in funding – combined with a step change in structure and organisation. We should remember that we do already have considerable skills in taking someone who lacks motivation and the necessary skills for employment and getting them job-ready. We just need a more focused and personalised approach, where:

- each individual is properly assessed as to capability and need, is assigned to a suitable programme and is properly advised and guided along the way – requiring a much more powerful advice structure;
- there is a greatly strengthened, more effective and better-funded structure of provision across the country; and
- there is a significant expansion of the provider/employer network to ensure that trained people find employment.

The frustration is that 'all of the above' is already successfully done, it is just not universal across the country.

Learning for its own sake

My focus so far has been on work and employment – from which all else follows. However, learning for its own sake and learning in pursuit of personal, recreational interest is also vital to a vibrant society.

It is both interesting and difficult to compare what is seen as the golden age of adult and community learning in the twentieth century with the situation today, where, my suspicion is, a combination of increased living standards and technology have meant a significant increase in self-funded personal interest and recreational learning, whether through sports, music, literature, arts or DIY. This is making a huge contribution to the development of a learning society

It is an unhappy reflection that although our society already meets, to a significant extent, the aspirations of the 'Big Society', David Cameron's flagship initiative has run to ground with so little effect. Learning has a big part to play in taking this agenda forward, but most learning of this sort is funded mostly by the individual – with the fabric supported by local and national public funding, not least the National Lottery Fund.

As with the other fundamentals, there is the issue of disadvantaged people, including the elderly and unemployed, who simply cannot afford to follow their desires. In particular, for the young and the unemployed, it can be personal and recreational interests that can motivate them to seek and gain employment and a better life. There is already a fabric of funding for this part of the population – and I would encourage it to be significantly improved, both for young people and adults, as part of the overall step change I would like to see in terms of employment.

My theme should by now be clear. We should recognise that UK society already has many of the features of a learning society described in the Green Paper. We should also acknowledge that more can be done to improve the current situation, both structurally and in terms of impetus. Government can play a positive and encouraging part. Crucially, we do not currently do enough to fund and support the engagement of the disadvantaged and disaffected. This needs to change. Sadly, the political will to make this happen is lacking.

Ian Ferguson is a businessman and Skills Commissioner who has been involved in national education policy and funding for nearly 15 years. He has been a member of the national Learning and Skills Council, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the Young People's Learning Agency, among others. He is currently on the Advisory Group of the Education Funding Agency. He is writing in a personal capacity.

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In 2010 the newly elected Conservative-Liberal coalition government launched the consultation that would lead to its skills strategy, Skills for Sustainable Growth, and its funding plan, Investing in Skills for Sustainable Growth, which set the policy direction for the period 2011–15. John Hayes, then Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, in his foreword to the consultation document, stressed the need for a more responsive system, informed by the choices of individuals and employers, and recognised both the economic and the social benefits of learning. By acknowledging the value of learning, he wrote, 'we can begin the task of re-evaluating our priorities, rediscovering craft, defining community learning, rejuvenating apprenticeships, rebalancing the economy and building a big society'. He elaborated his ideas in a number of speeches given around this time, most notably in this talk to the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce (RSA) in October 2010, shortly before the outcome of the consultation was published.

EXCERPT FROM 'THE CRAFT SO LONG TO LERNE'

John Hayes MP

Revaluing the practical

"FE colleges are the great unheralded triumph of our education system. But their capacity to innovate has been limited by the target-driven, bureaucratic, micro-management which characterised the last government's approach to skills. This government could not be more different. We will free colleges to innovate and excel. In fact we have already begun rolling back the stifling blanket of red tape and regulation and we will go further."

For decades, people have been calling for greater parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications. Those calls have invariably fallen on deaf ears. Instead, we have seen a dilution both. Too many things that are fundamentally practical have been given an academic veneer. Not because it's needed to produce a better craftsman, but simply because it seems to legitimise craft for those who are fundamentally insecure about practical learning.

Ironically, many such people have done academic study no favours. But, regardless, the academic route continues to enjoy greater esteem. Parents and grandparents will proudly display photographs of their offspring in graduation garb, whatever has been studied, wherever. Such is the power of the degree brand.

Of course, university qualifications have an unbroken European history of nearly a thousand years ... And, even in an age of 45 per cent participation, they retain an aura of intellectual and social exclusivity. The same can be said of few practical qualifications, because many come and go with alarming frequency ... before even employers in the sector concerned can work out exactly what they mean ... I think it impoverishes our culture that even apprenticeships, which have been around as a form of training for at least twice as long as universities, do not confer a particular title.

That's just one reason of many that things need to change. People speak of the intellectual beauty of a mathematical theorem. But there is beauty, too, in the economy and certainty of movement of a master craftsman. I believe that both kinds of beauty must be recognised on their own terms. And that implies not that the stock of academe must fall, but that the stock of craft must rise.

The value of skills

Change of the kind I seek would colour our national life in the three ways. The first is economic. The comparative orthodox esteem in which vocational and academic qualifications [are held] seems to have relatively little to do with earning potential.

Indeed, at times like these, with many traditional graduate recruiters cutting back, a practical skill may often be more marketable. The essence of the value of a skill lies in the fact that not everyone has it, assuming a skill has a market value ... The higher and more sophisticated the skill, the more value it is likely to add to a product. And, as Lord Leitch and others have argued, the higher the skills levels available in an economy, the more they add to the value of products and services, the more profitable the economy as a whole is likely to become, the more jobs it will support and the more business we will win from other countries.

And raising skills levels brings social as well as economic benefits, like better public health, lower crime rates and more intensive engagement by individuals in the sorts of voluntary and community activities that fuel the common good and power the national interest. Where there is disagreement about this it tends not to be about the principle of needing to build a high-skill economy, but about how the cost of developing the skills in question should be shared between individuals, employers and the state.

The second area where elevating the status of craft would bring benefits is social. Sadly few [people] these days are described – or describe themselves – as a master-craftsman.

In part, that is the consequence of social change. Within living memory, the butcher, the baker and the candlestick-maker enjoyed significant social status, alongside the bank manager, the lawyer and the schoolteacher. But these days, in most of Britain, the hard-won skill of individuals has been subsumed by brutal, impersonal ubiquity ... [with] [b]utchers, bakers and others reduced to anonymous shop assistants in soulless megastores.

Arts and Crafts

But history shows us that there is an alternative. When industrialisation was reaching its zenith here, it provoked a reaction which eventually became known as the Arts and Crafts movement.

This movement ... recognised the unbreakable link between satisfaction in work and quality of life. Its proponents considered the dehumanising effects of mass production in their own time and sought to recreate what they saw as a happier period for working people. A period when their skills were recognised, valued and freed to produce great art.

One of the leaders of the movement, William Morris, wrote that:

[T]he Middle Ages was a period of greatness in the art of the common people. The treasures in our museums now are only the common utensils used in households of that age, when hundreds of medieval churches – each one a masterpiece – were built by unsophisticated peasants.

... The world [characterised by Morris] is one in which membership of a craft guild, and consequently the skills required to qualify, was something to which ordinary people aspired. It's a world in which bakers and builders are proud to be what they are, and to be admired as such by others. And it's a world in which people can realise the satisfaction that practising a skill proficiently can give. In our age that satisfaction can, in principle, be available to anyone. It should be available to more.

... The benefits to individuals of acquiring new skills, whether for work or for private satisfaction, are reflected throughout society. I certainly don't mean to idealise hard work ... [T]here's nothing necessarily dignified about ... jobs that are physically hard and dirty or just boring and repetitive. But neither should we underestimate the dignity of labour – the satisfaction of a job well done ... [T]o do so is to undervalue those who labour. It's a dignity we must rejuvenate, because many, though not all, practical skills are undervalued in our society.

... The third area where we need change is cultural. The men who built ... the cathedrals were not, by and large, academic. Even now, they challenge our prejudices about what culture is and who creates it ... The craftsmen who built Georgian and, especially, Victorian London were both numerous and anonymous. But they, too, created an environment where the effects of craft enriched ordinary people's lives.

Revaluing the practical

... The sort of revaluation I'm calling for won't be easily accomplished. But I think there is a general recognition right across the spectrum of political and educational opinion that one is needed. So what can we do? There are five things I'd like to suggest.

The first is to continue and intensify our efforts to re-establish apprenticeship as the primary form of practical training. We will create more apprenticeships than modern Britain has ever seen. And not just in the traditional craft sectors but in the new crafts too – in advanced engineering; IT; the creative industries or financial services. It's not just that apprenticeships work – though they do. And it's not just that apprenticeship is probably the most widely-recognised brand in the skills shop-window – although it is. It's also about what apprenticeships symbolise. The passing-on of skill from one generation to the next and the proof that this offers that learning by doing is just as demanding and praiseworthy as learning from a book ... [W]e need, with the help of sectoral bodies, to seek out new and more effective ways of recognising apprentices' achievements.

Second, we must re-evaluate and indeed redefine what a sectoral approach means. It's been clear since even before guilds and livery companies existed that different sectors require specific skills, and that it therefore makes sense for sectoral bodies to be closely involved in designing training and qualifications and in setting standards. In some sectors, that link has been obscured, although it remains clear in others. The goldsmiths' and fishmongers' companies are good examples of that, as is the Royal College of Surgeons ... There is ... an opportunity for the sector skills councils (SSCs) to grasp. I want SSCs to dare to rise to the challenge of going beyond the strictly utilitarian, of becoming guilds for the twenty-first century, creating a sense of pride in modern occupations, and giving individual workers a sense of worth and purposeful pride.

Third, we must not forget the role that informal learning also plays in teaching skills. Acquiring skills make our lives, not necessarily wealthier, but definitely fuller. It raises our self-esteem and often also the esteem in which others hold us ... The desire for skills can be accompanied by frustration if there is no clear way in which to gain them. But if they are available, what a difference they can make to individuals and communities. Show me a society where everyone has the opportunity and desire to seek out new knowledge and new skills and I'll show you a society that really deserves to be called 'bigger'. That is why last week, as part of what's probably the most hard-nosed cull of Government spending there has been in modern times, the budget for informal adult learning was protected. Learning for the common good protected. And on my watch it will remain so.

Facilitating progression

My fourth point follows on from the previous three. We must do much more to facilitate progression. Under the last government, we heard a great deal about creating ladders of learning.

But their approach was fundamentally flawed because it was based on identifying problems and then trying to nail a few more rungs on the ladder to compensate. In fact, what the learner got was not so much one ladder as a game of snakes and ladders.

Our task must, therefore, be to break down the barriers to progression that have been progressively erected. And to reject artificial distinctions wherever we find them. For example, I don't know how many of you could give a comprehensible explanation of the difference between Level 3 and Level 4, and why it matters. I certainly know that many of those that administer the system couldn't, and I doubt whether I could either.

We must also make the barrier between higher education and further education more permeable. If we want learning to be really lifelong, the road for any individual from basic skills to higher learning – not necessarily provided in higher education – must be as smooth as we can make it.

My fifth point is about further education providers. FE colleges are the great unheralded triumph of our education system. But their capacity to innovate has been limited by the target-driven, bureaucratic, micro-management which characterised the last government's approach to skills. This government could not be more different. We will free colleges to innovate and excel. In fact, we have already begun rolling back the stifling blanket of red tape and regulation and we will go further.

Our mission is to free colleges to be more responsive to learner choice and employer demands. This is vital to build provision sufficiently nimble to respond to dynamic demand. But often an understated product of this will be to drive up the status of FE colleges, their teachers and learners, at last recognised as the jewels in learning's crown.

... I think it's high time to create a new aesthetics of craft, indeed, a new Arts and Crafts movement, for Britain in the 21st century ... So, while we work to encourage the learning of practical skills, we must also work to build demand for and recognition of them: craft to feed the common good; skills to serve national interest. Ours will be – must be – the age of the craftsman.

John Hayes is a Conservative Member of Parliament for South Holland and the Deepings, a constituency he has held since 1997. He was director of a computer company and a local councillor before becoming an MP. He held a number of frontbench roles in Opposition before being appointed Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning in May 2010. He became Minister of State for Energy in 2012 and in March 2013 was appointed Minister without Portfolio at the Cabinet Office and Senior Parliamentary Adviser to the Prime Minister.

PARITY OF ESTEEM BEGINS AT SCHOOL

A response by Mike Smith

John Hayes was partly right and partly wrong. Where I believe he was right was on the need for parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes.

When you look back over the past 50 or 60 years, and compare the UK to nations such as Switzerland and Germany, it is obvious that we have lost something and that we no longer value vocational skills in the same way that we value academic skills. We are a much poorer nation for it. In France, for example, someone who has studied a vocational skill, a master *boulangier*, for example, is highly esteemed and will have had extensive training in his profession. We don't have the same respect for vocational skill in this country. Those who follow that route are often made to feel second-best, as having somehow failed. Little wonder then we have difficulty recruiting enough young people to vocational pathways, and face skills gaps in higher technical job roles. There is a major cultural issue behind this and John Hayes was right to highlight it.

Where I think he got it wrong was in harking back to a lost era of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, even going back to medieval times and the language of craft guilds. I appreciate that Hayes, who is a passionate historian, was trying to recover a way of valuing something that is now undervalued by our society. But the language put a lot of people off, particularly in the skills sector, where he planned a 'further education guild' (what became the Education and Training Foundation). For most people, the language was just too arcane. It didn't advance the cause but instead painted a chocolate-box view of craft skills that was out of step with the times.

Of course, as John Hayes acknowledged, people have called for greater parity of esteem for decades. The big test of the Conservative-Liberal coalition's reforms, almost five years on, is whether they have made an impact. And I don't think we are any closer to addressing this disparity in the way vocational and academic skills are perceived. This is clear if you consider the numbers of people going into apprenticeships aged between 16 and 18, and compare it to the numbers going into university, despite the hike in tuition fees. It was expected that the increase in higher education fees would put a lot of people off. But, in fact, numbers have held up, for young people at least. Over that same period, the number of people aged 16–19 starting apprenticeships has decreased. Apprenticeships have gone up overall, but that's because of the growth in 25-plus apprenticeships (an extension of the apprenticeship brand which has done more harm than good in terms of reputation). The evidence suggests we are no closer to cracking this problem.

Demand for skills

If we are to have an impact we have to think seriously about where the demand for vocational skills is coming from.

For all the warnings about skills shortages, particularly in STEM-related areas, employers are not really doing much about it. We frequently hear about skills gaps and shortages but, in terms of major action in the form of new apprenticeship programmes or thousands more young people becoming apprentices, it hasn't happened. Many employers have filled that gap by recruiting people from overseas, and, I suspect, a lot would like to continue to do that. But it's not a solution to the problem and, in the long term, it's not a sustainable approach.

The government will be hoping its reforms can make a difference here, particularly in giving employers direct access to government money to design and guide the training they need. It's too early to assess the impact of those reforms. Perhaps the one thing that will change the balance be the shortage of people to do the vocational work that we need as a nation. Employers, particularly those in construction and

engineering, are raising concerns about the dwindling skilled workforce. These concerns seem particularly pertinent given the large-scale infrastructure projects in the pipeline. Employers need more young people and we can only do this by making vocational routes more attractive for them.

Skills apartheid

This brings me to schools. Any serious attempt to address this issue has to begin with schools, which are one of the main drivers of this lack of parity of esteem.

There is almost a cultural apartheid operating in many secondary schools against vocational education, compared to a traditional A-level entry to university. In part, it's accidental. New teachers will have followed an academic route, doing A-levels, going to university, doing their teacher training, before ending up back in a school. They have little real-world experience, and if they have any direct experience of vocational work, it is likely to be at a very low-level. Many of them just see vocational as second class.

That is one issue. But it is deeper-rooted than that. It is also to do with the way schools, and, indeed, the whole education and training system, is set up. Funding is predicated on bums on seats. Hard-pressed head teachers who want to keep their sixth-forms open are not going to tell their young people that, given their skills and aptitudes, they would be best off going for a high-quality vocational training route. They will try to persuade them to stay and to fit in with what they can offer, however inappropriate that might be. The way the system operates is perverse. It acts against the interests of individuals, it acts against the interests of employers, and it acts against the interests of the nation.

There has to be some incentive or disincentive, particularly in secondary schools, to make sure people follow the right career path. Those career paths must be of the right quality and there must be the right level of engagement with employers, so there is actual

demand for the skills acquired. It's important that there are high-quality vocational pathways out there which either take people into high-level skilled jobs or into higher education, and on to higher-level professional jobs. For all of this to work, we need not only improved advice and guidance in secondary schools but also a further education and skills sector which is adaptable and responsive to learner choice and employer demand, as Hayes rightly argues. His government's reforms have delivered greater autonomy and more flexibility in the further education sector. The final years of the Labour administration were characterised by a culture of command-and-control, driven by centrally set targets. That has changed, but the change has not been easy for many providers.

To an extent, we became hooked on being told what to do. When you have been used to working in a culture of micro-management and central control, it is very difficult, when told suddenly you have all these new freedoms, to react in a positive way. Many organisations simply weren't prepared to exploit those freedoms, particularly public bodies which, perhaps, don't have employer engagement in their DNA. Not only have many of these organisations become used to a command-and-control regime, they very often do not have processes in place to operate in a new, more dynamic environment, nor do they have the mindset for it. Where the coalition made a mistake was in thinking that simply by telling organisations they have these new freedoms and flexibilities they would change overnight. That was never going to happen. Colleges, after all, were established by incorporation in 1993, and the world is now a very different place. Some have been quick to adapt, others have not. As we approach the general election in May 2015 we should be prepared to face some difficult questions about the purpose of further education and whether colleges, in particular, are fit for purpose.

Common language

One of the problems the sector and employers face is that, very often, we do not talk the same language when it comes to skills and training.

There is a lack of understanding among some employers as to what education is all about. We have to find a way to translate that into a language they can understand. It cuts the other way too. A lot of staff within institutions worked in industry many years ago and have an outmoded idea of what the modern world of work is about. That's a fairly fundamental barrier. If you are going to talk you have to be able to talk one another's language. But it's important that we find ways to facilitate that two-way conversation, and there are examples of it working well, involving both colleges and the private sector. It's down to education, to a large extent, of employers, on the one hand, and the education sector, on the other. We need to get it right: employers in the lead but providers, who are the professionals when it comes to pedagogy and development, driving their agenda forward.

It's likely that the whole landscape will be rethought following the general election, with some radical options on the table, as they were at the start of the current parliament (when secretary of state Vince Cable was invited to consider the withdrawal of all state funding for further education, with the exception of apprenticeships). It may be that things will change because of the reforms the coalition has put in train, particularly the new funding regime. One of the things it has attempted to do is to create a free-market economy within the skills sector. The idea of giving money to employers is that by doing so you effectively create a free market. That could be seen as courageous or as misguided, particularly at a time when we are experiencing acute skills shortages and further education needs, more than ever, to play a full part. Certainly, there are likely to be casualties – there will always be winners and losers in a free market – and a danger that important educational infrastructure, built up over many decades, could be lost.

Huge savings

Whichever party is in power following the election, huge savings will have to be made, and there is likely to be a major impact on the sector.

Funding will be the big issue for the foreseeable future. From one perspective, things look fairly grim for further education, As John Hayes rightly says, it is the overlooked sector. From the government perspective, it is all about schools and universities. And there is this bit in the middle that they don't really understand. It may well be tough for FE, probably more so for colleges than for independent training providers. That will increase competition between institutions. People have a rose-tinted view of education and training that everyone in the sector plays nicely, collaborating for the good of individual learners and society. That couldn't be further from the truth at the moment. Education and skills is highly complex. It's full of ambiguity, it's full of uncertainty and it's volatile. It's highly politicised, locally and nationally – and it is highly competitive when it comes to getting students to join our institutions. That's going to become still more acute, making collaboration much more difficult, certainly in the short term.

That's the pessimistic view. The optimistic view is that this could well be the catalyst to rejuvenate the entire further education sector and perhaps start to put into practice some of the things that we have long talked about – such as the blurring of the lines between FE and HE and the breaking down of unhelpful and artificial barriers between types of institution. We have to change to respond to market conditions and, in the longer-term, that may turn out to be a good thing. That change, for me, must begin with the schools sector. As an engineer, I naturally compare this to a manufacturing process. If a process creates a large amount of scrap for rework, you would eliminate that and try to make sure it's done right first time. That gets to the heart of the problem with our secondary school system. How can we, as a society, continue to put up with a system from which only 55 per cent of pupils emerge with the minimum standard aged

16 to enter into employment and society? I can't think of any other sector or part of life in which we would accept that 45 per cent of the kids basically didn't make it and that it is down to another sector, further education, to sort it out. If you are talking about real cost savings for the nation in the future that is where this whole debate has to be.

Mike Smith is Chief Executive of Gen2. He has over 25 years of experience working both in and with the further education sector. Prior to joining Gen2, he worked for 20 years in the nuclear industry in a variety of senior roles. A chartered engineer by profession, he has experience in the design and delivery of high-quality training and educational programmes to support the engineering, nuclear and advanced manufacturing sectors.

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Baroness Sharp chaired the Independent Commission on Colleges in their Communities, an inquiry organised by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, the Association of Colleges and the 157 Group. Her role, as she described it in the commission's interim report, was to 'give substance' to talk within the new UK coalition government about colleges 'being more responsive to learner and employer choice ... often linked to the loose phrase about serving their communities'. Citing John Hayes's description of colleges as 'the great unheralded triumph of our education system' and his pledge to 'free colleges to innovate and excel', Baroness Sharp stressed 'not just the narrow skills remit for colleges but the wider public benefits that can flow from their activities and their contribution as state-funded assets'. Her final report, published in 2011, set out a vision of colleges at the heart of their communities, promoting 'a shared agenda of activities which both fulfil their central role of providing learning and skills training to young people and adults, but also reach out into their communities, catalysing a whole range of further activities'.

EXCERPT FROM A *DYNAMIC NUCLEUS: COLLEGES AT THE HEART OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES*

Baroness Margaret Sharp

Colleges leading communities

"Partnership and collaboration are key elements in the implementation of our vision, with colleges acting as catalysts at the centre, forming partnerships with local employers, helping and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, and working closely with schools and universities, local authorities, voluntary and community groups, and other public services."

Further education colleges occupy a pivotal space in the learning and skills landscape. Their provision is exceptionally diverse, with informal and non-accredited learning sitting alongside vocational and academic study. Their primary role is the provision of high-quality learning and skills serving both their immediate communities and broader 'interest' communities throughout the UK and abroad. At the same time many colleges have developed a significant wider role in their communities, contributing to widening access to learning, community cohesion and the development of civil society and enterprise.

Colleges have traditionally engaged with working-class communities through their vocational and adult education provision, and work with specific disadvantaged groups of adults and young people, often through partnership with the voluntary sector. This is also true of a number of other systems internationally, particularly the United

States. The US's community college model has a decentralised system of governance and finance, with a remit to widen participation and encourage learners of all backgrounds and abilities. One notable success of this model is in improving access to higher education, which has been a primary focus of community colleges. However, almost 50 per cent of learners leave without a qualification, whereas the record of English colleges is much better.

The notion of the Big Society is underpinned by a belief that increased participation in learning can benefit wider communities by increasing education and skill levels which, in turn, will raise self-esteem, encouraging social and community cohesion. As major social entrepreneurs in their own right, colleges have a significant contribution to make, both in terms of encouraging adults to develop entrepreneurial skills and in coaching and supporting people in starting up and establishing new businesses. These approaches will only be effective if they are located in a context that is relevant to the individuals and their communities. Partnership with voluntary and community groups, already a feature of the work of many colleges, is necessary to develop an appropriate curriculum.

Barriers to entry to learning need to be understood from the learner's perspective: are individuals 'hard to reach' or are institutions 'hard to enter'? Outreach and development work are required to support the engagement of the most disadvantaged learners. Many move from basic and often non-accredited courses to the development of practical skills which support advocacy and democratic engagement. Involvement in such activities enhances the credibility and reputation of colleges and encourages more to pursue the path of learning. However, current funding regimes requiring, for example, co-investment from the learner even on basic skills courses such as ESOL, are limiting the degree to which colleges can keep open these pathways.

Funding constraints

... Although [since 2010] there has been some simplification of the funding regime it still remains unduly prescriptive, with funding depending on such things as age, employment status and the level and aim of qualification sought.

Confronted by cuts and other uncertainties on top of this already complex funding regime, some colleges opt to retreat to the low-risk areas of 16–19 provision and apprenticeships (even here, the funding regime discourages provision in communities where there is a risk of lower success rates). Other colleges, however, have been able to develop innovative programmes reaching out to marginalised, 'hard-to-reach' groups despite some of these constraints.

The curriculum offered by colleges cannot be considered in isolation from external strategic factors that drive or limit their abilities to respond. Funding and regulatory regimes are limiting factors in curriculum development and delivery, and the methodology relating to qualifications and units still effectively micromanages the way in which the budget stream can be used. This inevitably inhibits the flexibility of colleges' response to local and individual needs. Thus, the potential of the Qualifications and Credit Framework to provide a flexible and accessible curriculum for adults is constrained by current funding methodologies. There is concern too that the perception of inspection and regulation systems can discourage innovation or work with non-traditional learners because of the potential impact on minimum performance levels, success rates and inspection grades. This may narrow rather than widen participation, particularly among the most disadvantaged adults. It may also discourage colleges from offering part or unit qualifications if success rates are still related to full qualifications.

Colleges which have succeeded in breaking free from the 'shackles' of the funding regime have often done so by developing a series of partnerships with other players, both public and private sector. Such partnerships have the advantage of both bringing in new resources and spreading risks amongst these players.

Colleges work in partnership with numerous different types of organisation to meet the skills needs of learners ... Negotiating partnership agreements, sometimes involving multiple partners, takes a good deal of top management time, requires considerable resource input and carries further risks. Nevertheless, where successful, they unlock new resources, spread risk and can bring new, innovative ideas into play.

Recent research by the National Foundation for Educational Research which examined partnership work between colleges and local authorities highlighted a number of key lessons if collaboration was to be effective. These included: establishing relationships in which trust and openness were evident; having confidence that partners will deliver; sharing a vision and understanding of the project; regular and robust communication systems and the involvement of senior leadership. They also suggested that it was important to ensure that sufficient time and resources were dedicated to the partnership and that partners understood that other partners might operate in different ways and have competing priorities which would sometimes get in the way.

Nevertheless, partnership between different players at a local level can be immensely powerful and many colleges are playing a central role in creating such partnerships, despite financial constraint and the absence of a consistent approach to local skills planning. Already rooted in their communities in a variety of ways that add public value and contribute to social and economic well-being, colleges are centrally positioned between the educational community, on the one hand, and the employer community on the other. They work closely with local authorities and other local organisations, health organisations and the police. They also have links into community organisations such as youth groups and faith communities.

Partnership and collaboration are key elements in the implementation of our vision, with colleges acting as catalysts at the centre, forming partnerships with local employers, helping and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and working closely with schools and universities, local authorities, voluntary and community groups, and other public services.

Local decision-making

... Although international examples are of limited value in terms of direct transferability, one lesson from abroad is the importance of local decision making, where 'local' means close to the consumer and the needs of the locality.

Systems which give considerable autonomy to the local unit have tended to be more successful, as have governance regimes which recognise local stakeholder involvement. Autonomy tends to encourage innovation and the development of new ideas. It can, however, lead to uneven standards unless there are also strong quality control and performance management systems.

The balance between the different communities served by a college is best achieved through local decision-making rather than by central direction. Local governance and accountability arrangements should inform these strategic planning decisions. The tensions between central policy direction and local accountability need to be addressed within the context of the public value that colleges bring to their communities. Colleges can demonstrate local leadership and responsiveness that illustrates the principles of localism in a practical way and yet sometimes be at variance with central policy direction.

... Encouraged by successive governments, colleges have engaged with employers, small and large, either directly or indirectly, for some time, and take a wide range of approaches to the work. Some see their local business community as customers for learning products, others as *co-designers* of provision to meet specific business needs. The notion of a continuum ranging from selling to engagement through to co-design is a useful way of reflecting on colleges' relationship with employers and mirrors a similar continuum in relation to engagement and involvement of learners. All the evidence suggests that the more employers are engaged in the design and management of the learning process, the more satisfied they are.

Alignment between vocational education, the local labour market and the wider needs of the economy, has been a major theme of policy in most industrialised countries. A few systems – notably in Australia and Germany – include collaboration between government, industry and education providers in determining qualifications and curricula. Strong systems of apprenticeships are frequently a critical mechanism when it comes to ensuring employer engagement and investment, a particular issue in England where too few employers regard investment in training as a priority ...

Local skills strategies

The contribution colleges make to local skills delivery and their key place in the local economy means that they have a critical and underexploited role in contributing to the development of local skills strategies.

Their role should be better aligned with local social and economic planning, and in particular, with the emerging Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). Colleges are often closer to local businesses than universities precisely because of their role as major skills providers in their areas. Working collaboratively with local business and local authorities on developing the local skills strategy can be a fruitful exercise for all involved.

There are particular problems in relation to SMEs. Their needs may be more diverse and less clearly articulated than those of larger businesses and finding time and people to develop links always poses a problem. They are a prime example of where outreach work may pay off, partly because they are likely to relate more readily to the college than to other organisations. It is often the learner in such cases who acts as the point of contact and mediates between the skills provider and employer ...

There are considerable benefits to involving learners in the development of their own education. Research ... has shown that taking account of learner voices can have positive outcomes for maintaining quality standards, improving the student learning experience and the learner motivation and engagement. There is a wealth of good practice already undertaken by colleges in England and throughout the UK. There is also wide appreciation that a differentiated approach is required in capturing and responding to learner voices, with adult learners requiring a different approach to that employed for younger learners. Most colleges work along a continuum, with feedback from learners at one end and involvement in curriculum development at the other...

The success of such initiatives depends on a number of factors, including the creation of trusting relationships between learners and educators, which, in turn, reflects the level of organisational buy-in to the concept of the learner voice. In order to be effective the learner voice must be representative of all of the college's communities, both geographic and communities of interest. A strategic, whole-college approach is required to engage, understand and work with learner communities. College corporations need to develop a good understanding of what is relevant to learners from these different communities. Research suggests that although many of the more common practices are very effective at reaching full-time students, levels of engagement with those who are studying part-time or at a distance are poor. Colleges therefore need to put particular effort in to reaching into these communities.

Methods of delivery

... First and foremost, colleges are institutions of further education, established to deliver high-quality learning and skills to young people and adults.

They have developed a range of methods of delivery in addition to their primarily campus-based, full-time offer designed to meet the wide-ranging learning needs of students and to widen participation.

Colleges have implemented community-based initiatives to facilitate better access to those groups typically marginalised within a local area and have been successful in engaging disadvantaged and hard-to-reach learners, learners with low levels of literacy or numeracy skills, and adults with learning difficulties and disabilities. They also attract a culturally and ethnically diverse student body, with a higher representation of minority ethnic learners than the communities they serve.

Reaching out to disadvantaged, hard-to-reach groups within their communities not only leads to a steady supply of learners for higher-level, qualification-based study, but supports colleges' wider role in promoting the well-being and cohesion of their communities. This, in turn, leads to significant benefits in other areas of public policy, including health, crime reduction, social care, support for families and volunteering.

Colleges are key strategic partners and their contribution and impact on society is often understated in relation to their economic role. This is not to deny that colleges are a significant part of their local economy. They are not only providers of learning but also major employers, and the owners and generators of community assets. But they are also major contributors to social welfare not least by the creation of learning communities and safe, tolerant spaces in which people can come together to learn. This wider role of colleges is little understood but it can be crucial in, for example, metropolitan areas where gang culture exists. The college, as a neutral environment, provides a stress-free, safe haven for many young men and women.

The strategic contribution of colleges also should be recognised in the context of a shift to greater commissioning of public services where colleges could be involved in shaping and planning services relating to the areas they serve. A greater understanding of commissioning processes and commissioning cycles in the public sector, particularly in local authorities, would be beneficial. Experience from other public services, such as health, provides models where providers can both contribute to planning and engage in delivery without conflict of interest.

Entrepreneurial leaders

... The most important factor required to turn this vision into reality is to support and train a new generation of college leaders who are both leaders and entrepreneurs.

In order for colleges and government to meet each aspect of this shared agenda, the staff charged with responsibility for implementation and accountability, for ensuring their college is fully responsive to their communities, and for the outcomes articulated in this report, need appropriate, planned development and support.

College staff need to be skilled in securing routes of engagement with a wide range of local communities and in the co-creation of services, working across traditional organisational boundaries. They also need to possess the so-called 'softer' skills of empathy, emotional intelligence, working beyond formal authority and being able to take initiative and generate innovation, in real time, on the front line.

This requires a stronger focus on distributed leadership, professional autonomy and peer support and review. As well as developing and supporting the skills of teachers as specialists *and* educators *and* facilitators of new forms of learning opportunities. There is also a key role for support staff to ensure appropriate frontline customer services and back-office support. A new community-led pedagogy is also needed and we believe the key to making this happen is through fostering high-quality leadership with a clear and passionate focus on teaching and learning.

The Commission believes that a renewed and passionate focus by all staff and leaders on the importance of good-quality teaching and learning, and improved relationships with and responses to their local communities, are pivotal to success. Approaches to staff and leadership development need also to acknowledge the changed and tighter fiscal context in which public services operate. The environment is one in which more is required with the same or

fewer inputs. At the same time greater flexibility offers opportunities which can bring pay-offs but require taking risks. This is why we look to college leaders who are prepared to be entrepreneurs as well as leaders. It is also the reason training of college leaders should include risk taking and risk management.

Margaret Sharp, Baroness Sharp of Guildford, is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords and speaks for her party on education, science and technology in the upper chamber. She had a career as an economist and academic before entering the House of Lords as a life peer in 1998. She has played an active part in party policy-making, chairing a number of working groups and for several years acting a vice-chair to Paddy Ashdown on the party's main policy committee. She is a member of the Skills Commission.

GOOD RELATIONSHIPS AND A SHARED VISION ARE KEY

A response by Michael Davis

A week may be a long time in politics. Four years is, quite literally, a political lifetime. Yet Baroness Sharp's 2011 report, *A Dynamic Nucleus: Colleges at the heart of local communities*, remains relevant.

Indeed, the relevance and resonance of the findings has grown since publication, with a growing consensus as to the importance of the devolution of influence, autonomy and accountability at a local level.

There is no doubt that colleges should form a dynamic nucleus at the heart of their community. Indeed, the first key statement in the report *A New Conversation*, which the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) published last year in collaboration with the Gazelle Colleges Group and the 157 Group, was that the primary purpose of a college should be to contribute to its economic community.

This is not at odds with Baroness Sharp's more obviously social agenda. It is not an either/or of supporting local people or contributing to the economy, and, frankly, it is unhelpful to position economic and social goals as if in somehow in conflict. Instead, we should recognise the fact that, for most people, the first step towards 'social inclusion' is to be equipped with the skills and education to get in and on in work. There are some excellent examples of colleges working with employers to create local social and economic hubs, but there is still some way to go to fully realise Baroness Sharp's vision.

So what needs to change?

The skills narrative that we have, perhaps particularly in England, doesn't really help.

Skills policy has for too long laboured under the false paradigm that education providers are responsible for providing oven-ready skilled labour to the workplace, that qualifications are a proxy for skills and that the role of business is to submit timely requisition forms to get employees with the skills they need.

This simplistic and yet compelling narrative sets impossible expectations for everyone. Employers can be blamed for not clearly articulating the skills they need in a timely manner, awarding bodies and those responsible for setting standards for failing to properly translate skills needs into standards and qualifications, and 'providers' (a term I find particularly unhelpful) for a failure to follow the 'recipe' given to them by the qualification and/or a failure to deliver the skills needed.

Moreover, the skills narrative also allows for the separation of skills from the person and context, usually a workplace, where they will be used. Skills are 'carried' by people who have to have the opportunity not only to learn those skills but also to apply them and continue to apply them. The effective use of that skill is more often than not a function of the workplace – how engaged the employee is in a business, the skills of their line manager, and so on. This is all missing from our fallacious narrative, potentially understating the role that colleges can and could play.

Real-world outcomes

England is unusual in that funding follows the qualification, not the learner or the learning programme.

Consequently, there is a strong incentive for education providers to select qualifications that meet the needs of the student in recognising what they have achieved but don't necessarily help them get a good job and progress in their career thereafter. In study programmes for 16–18 year olds, funding follows the student rather than being tied to qualifications. If this were to be adopted for adult skills, colleges would have more freedom to focus on real-world outcomes, rather than qualifications. Don't get me wrong – qualifications are hugely important, both to individuals in recognising what they have achieved and building personal confidence, and to employers as a recruitment and selection tool. The point is that funding on the basis of qualifications alone puts too much weight upon them. It is a load that they simply can't bear and, at the same time, has resulted in a system that is complex to administer and assure, relative to other countries.

But what should those real-world outcomes be? And how should they be developed? This leads us into the question of accountability. Something I would be keen to see is local areas developing and adopting 'outcome agreements' with education providers as equal and integral partners. Working with industry and local economic stakeholders, they could establish a binding and lasting consensus as to what is important and how it can be best accomplished over the medium term. UKCES is working with the Association of Colleges to explore this area further, and we hope to publish a discussion paper later this year.

One thing that hasn't changed since Baroness Sharp's report is the constraint on the public purse. It would be disingenuous of me to imply that a transformation of the sort I describe above could be achieved simply by doing 'more with less'. The fact is that who pays, and what they pay for, is the single biggest influence on what colleges deliver. The good news is that there is a significant opportunity here that colleges aren't currently maximising.

A relevant offer

We know from our employer surveys that two-thirds of employers provide training for their staff, and that, last year, employers spent around £3.4 billion on external training fees.

Yet the amount of that going to colleges decreased from 16 per cent in 2012 to just 12 per cent (£408 million) last year. The biggest factor in employers using or not using colleges and universities for training is the relevance of courses provided. So we can see an unpleasant catch-22 situation arising, where employers aren't using colleges because they don't think the courses are relevant – and colleges are unable to improve the relevance of their courses because of both the constraints of the public funding system and a lack of opportunity to engage with employers.

On this last point, I would challenge colleges to think about how they define the problem. I have had discussions where senior managers in colleges have said, 'The problem for us in engaging businesses is that the vast majority of businesses locally are small and hard to reach'. That is true but is analogous to a leisure centre manager saying 'the problem here is that the average client is overweight'. This may also be true, but it states the problem, not the opportunity, the strategy or the capabilities that you need to solve it. This is what colleges need to be focusing on. In UKCES's 2014 Employer Perspectives Survey we could see that employer use of FE colleges for training courses was double the UK average where they were working with other employers to develop skills expertise (16 per cent compared with eight per cent overall). FE colleges also had a weaker presence in the training market in the mid-size (25–99) business category: 20 per cent of employers reported using FE colleges in the last 12 months whereas 74 per cent used commercial providers over the same time period

As Baroness Sharp acknowledged, relationships – between employers, individuals, colleges and the local community – are at the heart of the dynamic nucleus. What is needed is to really think about what

that dynamic nucleus looks like. For me, as clichéd as it may sound, it is a funding and assurance framework that supports the co-creation of learning between employers, individuals and colleges. Colleges should not only be valued as 'skills providers' but should also have the capacity and capability to work with businesses to help them redesign job roles to 'eliminate skill shortages' or work with businesses to build their capability to support the training and development of employees. And, of course, Baroness Sharp is right to highlight the need for FE leaders to behave entrepreneurially in delivering this shared agenda. These skills are essential and it is important staff are encouraged and supported in developing them.

We have taken some important steps towards realising this. The challenge ahead is for the sector and political influencers to develop a long-term shared vision of the future of further education, and the policies to support it.

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Jim Krantz is a leading voice in the areas of organisational change, leadership and the design of work for high performance. He has written widely on organisational performance, the impact of emerging trends on the challenges of management, and issues of leadership in contemporary organisations. In 1988 he founded WorkLab, a consultancy which specialises in using management and behavioural science to help organisations in the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors translate strategy into action, align strategy with goals, and create methods that accelerate development and learning. Before becoming managing principal of WorkLab, Krantz was a senior consultant at the Wharton School centre for applied research, in the University of Pennsylvania, and action research fellow at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, in London.

AN INTERVIEW WITH JIM KRANTZ

Paul Stanistreet

People and organisations: leadership in challenging times.

These are difficult and challenging times, even for a sector with adaptation in its DNA. Further education leaders have had to deal with a combination of external instability, caused by technological and socio-economic change, and internal policy turbulence, reflected in high ministerial turnover and a culture of continual reform, which has characterised successive governments' approach to the sector.

Much is asked of colleges, and much is expected – the need for what Ruth Silver terms an 'adaptive layer' offering vocational and technical skills and second-chance education has never been plainer – yet resources are diminishing and many leaders struggle to define a clear mission for themselves and their institutions, one that speaks both to government directives and the needs of their communities. The challenge is significant, and multi-faceted. How can leaders ensure their workplaces are characterised by trust and collaboration, in the face of so much top-down structural change? How can they learn from their experience – and others' – in adapting to change? How can they sensibly manage the stress caused by turbulence and the pressures of accountability – what do they absorb and what do they pass on to staff? These are all questions which, in one form or another,

have preoccupied Jim Krantz over a long career. Few people better understand the dynamics of leadership in modern organisations.

Krantz has spent his professional career – and more than 40 years consulting on leadership and organisational performance – standing at the intersection of two ways of looking at the world: systems thinking and psychoanalysis. It gives him a distinct perspective when it comes to understanding and supporting organisational change and has led him to work in a tradition which seeks to reconcile two apparently contradictory approaches to thinking about organisations and their development. On the one hand, there is the structuralist tradition, proponents of which see structure – from the broadest strategic level to the minute detail of job design – as the defining factor in work performance. On the other, there is the human relations tradition, which sees the quality of human relationships as what really matters when it comes to creating high-performance, high-productivity workplaces. For Krantz, neither could be the whole story. ‘You can never fully maximise one side of the equation without taking the other into account,’ he says. ‘You can’t attend to one and not the other. But there is a way to think about them in correlation with one another, and that has been a very important development in the history of thought about organisations’.

Systems psychodynamics

It was within the Tavistock tradition, and the work of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, in particular, that Krantz found ‘the perfect place in which to integrate these two perspectives’.

The Tavistock Institute was founded in 1947, bringing together staff from a range of different disciplines to apply psychoanalytic and systems thinking to group and organisational life. The approach is sometimes termed ‘systems psychodynamics’. ‘The whole school of thought is based on being able to relate the social system, the human dynamics, with the formal organisation, the technical, structural, the

parts that are not human,' Krantz explains. 'Both unfold according to their different kinds of logic, but they are nevertheless deeply interdependent when it comes to the performance of organisations and the wellbeing of the people in them.' The most famous example of the application of the Tavistock school of thinking – the one that proved a breakthrough for the approach and which continues to inspire Krantz – concerned the introduction of new technology in the coal-mining industry in the UK in the late 1940s. The mechanised 'long-wall' method of mining, which allowed for a longer expanse of the coalface to be removed at once, had been expected to increase performance and productivity. Instead, the innovation resulted in increased absenteeism and industrial accidents, and poor productivity. Eric Trist, one of the founders of the institute (and, subsequently, Krantz's mentor), and Ken Bamforth, a postgraduate and former coal miner, were asked to look into the issue.

What they found was that the introduction of the new technology had resulted in the breakdown of the social systems that had developed underground around the old short-wall technologies and which contributed to worker safety and productivity, as well as supporting flexibility, interdependence and collaboration among miners. 'This new type of technology disrupted the social system that had developed in the mines,' Krantz says. 'Mining, of course, takes place in a very dangerous and difficult environment and those social systems, and the relationships that had developed between people, were a critical element both in ensuring safety and in getting the work done. When that variable in the equation dropped out, things went wrong. Trist and his colleagues were able to suggest a solution in which a modified version of the new technology could be introduced in a way which allowed the social system to function. It was the integration of the two, the technical and the social, that allowed progress to occur.' The insights from the study informed the development of emerging social-technical systems thinking, which postulated that neither the formal (technical or structural) nor the informal (social) sub-system, alone, was sufficient in understanding organisational performance. They had to be understood jointly, in relation to one another. This insight, Krantz acknowledges, more than influenced his subsequent practice – *it became* his practice.

Group thinking

Krantz's family background was another key factor in shaping his thinking. His upbringing was perhaps as important a preparation for his future work as was his academic training.

His father was a Jewish Polish/Russian immigrant who came to live in the United States in the 1920s, settling in Omaha, Nebraska. 'Growing up, I had the experience of being both a first-generation American and a minority. There were very few Jewish people. And those two things in particular sensitised me to group thinking and attuned me to some of the dynamics that we think about a lot now. You didn't, for example, want to do anything that would stimulate envy. This sensibility was very much with me from a very early age and it helps explain why group-relations thinking felt so comfortable.' Going to college only deepened his interest in systems and systems thinking, and it was there that Krantz began to learn about psychoanalysis, and to put the two together. Group processes and the unconscious became the two central preoccupations of his professional life. 'My career, really, has been a process of trying to explore both ways of thinking and in particular to try to stand on the seam between both ways of thinking and to look at the world from that seam.' He subsequently became an action research fellow at the Tavistock Institute and a consultant at the Wharton School, at the University of Pennsylvania. Krantz set up his own consultancy, WorkLab, in 1988, working with a wide range of commercial and not-for-profit clients – they are 'committed generalists', he says, with an ethos of collaborative problem-solving – to help them manage change and improve organisational performance.

Krantz's work is shaped by a number of principles, including, critically, a recognition that organisations are shaped by both social and technical forces. The second key principle informing his practice is that organisations exist in increasingly dynamic and unstable environments. This will undoubtedly resonate with many in the UK's further education sector, which, as City and Guilds recently pointed out, has been overseen by some 61 different secretaries of state in the past 30 years, and has moved between government departments no fewer

than 10 times. Uncertainty is one of the main concerns of leaders in FE, a symptom, Krantz suggests, of a wider turbulence. 'Our world is hyper-turbulent,' he says. 'When something happens in one part of the world it is experienced in another, and, of course, technology is changing fast. We have seen a breakdown in stable boundaries, familiar structures. This tradition, for example, was for many years based on the notion of small groups mediating structures, enabling people to think about their experience. That's gone now. We don't have stable small groups for the most part. People exist in larger groups, and they are coping with more primitive dynamics and anxieties. People have to cope with much more anxiety-laden, confusing uncertainty without the familiar structures that enabled them in the past to contain the experience productively. That's the challenge.'

Connecting the inside and the outside

Leaders, Krantz says, existing, as they do, on the boundary between the inside and outside of organisations, face a tough challenge in such an environment.

'That's a very important dimension of leadership: how do you shield your organisation, appropriately, from the anxiety, and how much of it do you pass it along, in the sense of alerting people to important things that are happening in the external world. The leader's job is to knit the internal and the external together in a way which creates productivity and commitment, while also addressing the authorising environment. This is a highly refined capability of leaders, to connect the inside and the outside in a way that works.' A failure to respond adequately can leave leaders 'detached and depressed or defensively omnipotent and grandiose'. Those who do respond well are likely to have a clear sense of purpose, a set of objectives that staff understand and to which they can commit.

'Clarity of purpose is one element which allows people in groups to cope with the uncertainties and with the turbulence,' Krantz explains, highlighting the third key principle of his work, that clarity

of objectives is an essential basis for high performance. 'An *organisation* is a task system, a set of activities designed to accomplish a certain purpose. The purpose is part of an *institution*. It's not the organisation itself. But an organisation has goals – and these must be things that can actually be accomplished – which allow the organisation to carry out the purposes of an institution. The capacity to accomplish these purposes requires a capacity to make decisions based on a clear understanding of what's *meant* to happen. Clarity of purpose is the tiller of the ship. It's how you know what choices and trade-offs you have to make. So often, people will say: "My problem is I don't have enough people" or "My problem is I don't have enough resources". There's a fundamental error in that kind of thinking. All management is the management of scarce resources. When someone says they don't have the resources, the unspoken question behind it is, "What are you meant to accomplish, and how realistic is it?"

Unrealistic expectations

Krantz points to the work of Isabel Menzies, another member of the Tavistock group, who studied workplaces in which staff were routinely tasked to do things which were beyond their resources, or ability.

'Clarity of purpose is not only about agreeing what we are about; it is about whether what we are trying to do is realistic. Menzies found that when we are asked to do things that are unrealistic in one way or another it creates what she called "anti-task" cultures and environments. She wrote an article about mental institutions. She had been called in to address an issue among the staff who were exhibiting some of the attitudes and behaviours of the delinquent adolescents who were detained by the institution. But her research suggested that it really was not about the persons involved, but about the systems to which they were adapting. She noticed that the stated task definition and the purposes of the institution were completely unrealistic, given the nature of the resources they had and what they were trying to accomplish. She realised that these widely unrealistic expectations

were ultimately manifested in the organisation in these anti-task cultures. The behaviour of the staff was really an expression of this really unrealistic set of expectations that the institution was acting as if it could accomplish.'

There is a question, Krantz says, about trying to understand what function certain types of organisation are to play on behalf of the larger society – one that further education, which has undergone more than its fair share of national rebranding exercises, will recognise. But a sense of purpose also comes from 'authentic' conversations among leaders and within sectors. A lot of that stems from how leaders are 'authorised from below', and that implies trust, one of the main issues raised by the groups Krantz works with. Trust, he argues, is 'an output of well-designed and well-led work systems' which 'creates conditions where people can be vulnerable and be more creative with one another, and where they can learn from experience. It creates opportunities, flexibility in how things are done. It's a kind of social capital.' Collaborative workplaces with a clear sense of mission, he says, 'are something every sector needs now. But the big question is how to develop them in the midst of this particular set of circumstances.' The question becomes still more pointed as people increasingly see themselves as 'citizens' of organisations, rather than finding their meaning 'through participation in a particular subset or division,' he says. What, Krantz asks, are the responsibilities of being a citizen within an organisation and how is that brought to the surface and articulated? That, he says, is an issue under renegotiation within organisations, as well as more widely, within civic society.

Learning from experience

The fourth, and last, core principle underpinning Krantz's work, is that the need to adapt to emerging conditions requires people in organisations to learn from experience.

One of the key elements of his work – and of systems thinking, applied in this context – is to help leaders learn from experience and to 'make sense of their experience in systemic terms as well as in personal terms'. That experience, Krantz says, is a huge potential source of information about the organisation around us, yet we tend to 'treat these experiences as if they are about our person and not to develop the category system that would allow us to decode what it means for the organisation'. That, he says, is why learning from experience 'requires a certain sort of vulnerability, a recognition that one is susceptible to dynamics that are not of one's own making. And it's often a struggle for leaders to recognise their own vulnerability. But that's where learning from experience comes from, that vulnerability'. Krantz makes a similar point about research. Too much of it, he says, fails to acknowledge that it takes place in a context which must also be understood. 'It's very important for us to do research. I hope more will be done, and that there will be more reflection on experience, but with the sensibility that it is a practice taking place within a context that also needs to be understood.'

Understanding is important, not only in improving performance and building trusting, collaborative workplaces, but also in promoting and making a case for the funding of an area of activity. Krantz talks with passion about the States' community college sector, without question, he says, 'the most important and successful anti-poverty programme we have', particularly with 'opportunities for people without any kind of college degree or professional preparation shrinking dramatically'. Yet, despite its huge importance in terms both of reducing poverty and making effective citizens, it is not, he says, well-understood. 'The community college does not have a revered place in our cultural history. It's the in-between space. We have our high schools, which are part of our communities and very well established, and then we have the university system. The community college system exists in a space between them. It's also, in a sense, a space for people who were left behind or fell out of the ordinary pathways. A complex set of emotions exist about that space – and because of that there is a tension which means that we don't embrace it in our awareness in the way that we

embrace other parts of the education system. Institutions represent things for society and the things they represent have to do with the way they are treated. Our community college system is a repository for many things: second chances, opportunities, particularly for people who have not succeeded yet – they are carriers of hope as well – and I think there is a complicated set of feelings about that population and those feelings stir up anxieties.’

Ambiguities and conflicts

There is a link here, Krantz thinks, to Menzies’ analysis of organisations which produce anti-task cultures among their workforces.

‘These ambiguities and conflicts and disagreements and confusions around the purposes and tasks of organisations reverberate within these organisations and affect leaders in very profound ways. That’s another example of the lack of awareness. We understand what high school is for and we understand what university is for, but many don’t really understand what community college is for.’ That can cause issues in terms of performance, since ‘when a system is expected to do two things rather than one thing, its resources are dissipated to some degree. There are huge expectations of the leaders of these systems and the constraints they are put under at the same time make it extraordinarily difficult. An individual might be authorised to do something quite straightforward, but then conditions are added, one has to do things in certain ways, and then the results are scrutinised. Maybe that would foster adolescent delinquent sentiments. That’s what we’re talking about but on a very big scale. It makes it vastly more difficult to have a clear vision of what an organisation is meant to be about.’



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