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Improving college effectiveness:

frameworks for research and development

by Professor Bridget Somekh, et al

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There is no agreement across the further education sector about the purposes of colleges or the values that underpin their work. There is no benchmark qualification for students on either entry or exit that could be used to measure value added.

In this paper, researchers from further and higher education discuss the nature of frameworks that shape the work of colleges. They offer a 'continua chart' that can be used to analyse the various conflicting frameworks.

They suggest changes to the dominant FEFC framework that would be likely to lead to improving college effectiveness.

Methodology

From April to July 1998, we carried out a scoping study for FEDA on 'Improving College Effectiveness in England and Wales'. The study was carried out by a team of seven researchers, including two from the FE sector and a consultant specialist in school effectiveness research. There were four strands of data collection:

- a literature review
- a questionnaire to all FE college principals
- an expert seminar and face-to-face and telephone interviews with key informants
- a focus group with middle managers, and face-to-face interviews with a range of staff in four colleges.

The work revealed a lack of agreement across the sector about the purposes of colleges or the values that underpin their work. Nor is there a benchmark qualification for even the majority of students, on either entry or exit from colleges, that could be used to measure the 'value added' by the college. However, FEFC is already putting into place systems to measure improvements in colleges' own performance over time, and comparing similar colleges. This will be of value to colleges and to the FEFC, particularly as it will be coupled with the new system of self-assessment. However, the data will not be of the quality necessary to replicate the methods of the 'school effectiveness' paradigm of research.

The final report will be published by FEDA in full later this year. The present paper presents only one aspect of the work: a tool for analysing and developing the frameworks that shape educational change.

Our research provided rich insights into the shifting culture of colleges, the attitudes of principals and lecturers towards the interlocking funding and inspection regimes of FEFC, and the time lag between the inception of new policy drivers and their embedding in the aims of principals and college staff. Drawing on this wider range of data, we developed a 'continua chart' (*opposite*) showing the characteristics of development work or research within the different paradigms of 'improvement' or 'effectiveness' researchers.

The nature and purpose of frameworks

A framework for improving educational effectiveness sets out the procedures for action at all levels from infrastructure, through organisational management, to the work of individual teachers and learners. It is grounded in a set of assumptions about educational values, for example the aims and purposes of education, including the relative importance of the interests of students, parents, local businesses and the state as a whole.

Underpinning these values are a wide range of theories that have explanatory and predictive power, ranging from theories about how people learn, to theories of social change and economic development. The extent to which these underpinning theories are explicit or implicit can vary considerably. As a set of procedures, the framework is usually fairly clear to policy-makers. However, it is usually revealed to teachers and lecturers only through the implementation of a range of policies that make up the strategies to put the framework into place. This study has revealed the existence of several different frameworks across the different educational sectors, partially overlapping, some emanating from policy-makers at national level, some from policy-makers (principals) at organisational level. The framework, set by gov-

ernment, that governs the work of the schools sector is the most fully developed, since many of its elements have been in place for some years.

All frameworks are dynamic rather than fixed, since politicians and policy-makers continually strive to improve them; and all frameworks exist alongside other procedures, values and theories that are grounded in the experience and assumptions of the individuals and groups who work in the educational institution. It is inevitable that any framework will be contested; to be effective it needs to contain mechanisms for control. Frameworks will, of course, be more or less coercive, depending on the value they place on individual freedom as opposed to 'the common good'.

The table opposite sets out the characteristics of two alternative paradigms (or models) for research and development. The 'Effectiveness paradigm' and 'Improvement paradigm' are broadly in line with two recognisably different approaches to improving educational effectiveness. Although very much oversimplified, these two sets of characteristics contain all the elements that make up the frameworks described in this study. The table might best be read as a set of continua, rather than a set of opposites, since all the frameworks contain some elements from both the effectiveness and the improvement paradigms.

Existing FEFC and FEFCW frameworks

The FEFC (and broadly similar FEFCW) procedures for funding and inspection currently fall rather more into the effectiveness paradigm than the improvement paradigm. The emphasis is on identifying good practice, inspection, target-setting, benchmarking, and measurement of performance, and on the close links between funding and performance.

Looking down the list, one can identify further shifts along the continua towards the effectiveness paradigm as a result of current policy initiatives. Examples are the introduction of procedures for analysing student retention and achievement and comparing performance between one college and

Characteristics of frameworks ('continua chart')

	Effectiveness paradigm characteristics	Improvement paradigm characteristics
Model of change	Presumed to be implemented by imitation of good practice	Presumed to depend on participatory processes to be effective
Accountability	Public – naming and shaming	Semi-public – professional
Culture of the organisation	Competitive Market-led Business organisation	Collegial Partnership-led Educational organisation
Management style	Business management	Educational leadership
Quality assurance mechanisms	Emphasis on external inspection Clear standards Target setting Benchmarking/ Performance indicators Measurement of performance Self-assessment required and centrally controlled	Emphasis on external consultancy and advice Ownership of proposed change Understanding of purposes of change Self-assessment integral to reflective practice of professionals
Q A systems	ISO9000 series Total Quality Management	Investors in People
Status of teaching staff	Trained deliverer of learning	Trusted professional
Motivation of teaching staff	Presumed to be driven by mechanisms of reward and punishment Desire to avoid unpleasant consequences	Presumed to be driven by professional values Ownership of change High morale, self-belief
Examination results	Examination results seen as key performance indicator	Examination results seen as key and used as indicator of teacher performance
Response to identified problems	Public 'naming and shaming' 'Special measures' – external support and structural change imposed	Advice and consultancy Change of key personnel encouraged
Funding	Linked to performance	Tailored to need
Funding mechanisms	Student enrolment Student progression Student retention	Prior estimates of student numbers Negotiations between principal and funding body
Widening participation	Stakeholder responsive	Socially responsive
Curriculum	Fitted to the external need (nation, employer, community)	Fitted to individuals' needs
Approach to learning	Student centred Teacher may become assessor only	Teacher managed Teacher leads and challenges learners
Role of assessment	To measure performance	To diagnose learning difficulties
Strengths of research in this paradigm	Detailed analysis of statistical information to inform management decision-making Predictive power	Detailed analysis of the processes that bring about, or serve as barriers to, change Explanatory power

another as an integral part of inspection; and the likely introduction of mechanisms for publicly identifying 'failing colleges'.

On the other hand, one can also identify a few shifts along the continua towards the improvement paradigm; for example, the move away from a market-led culture to a culture of partnership and collaboration.

In the course of this research, we have collected data that supports two different interpretations of the way in which colleges and staff respond to the FEFC's procedures for improving effectiveness. All colleges are worried about the perceived low level of funding. This is certainly as true of principals as it is of other staff. However, in relation to inspection and related procedures, we have repeatedly been given two accounts.

- According to the first account, the revised FEFC inspection framework recognises that the sector is 'maturing', gives more responsibility to colleges, and places more emphasis on partnership than on control. The relationships between the FEFC and colleges are perceived to be good. Many principals subscribe to this view.
- According to the second account, the FEFC has used its funding mechanism, and its inspection procedures, to impose a high level of control on colleges. This has produced the appearance of co-operation, but in reality this is only compliance and hides deep-seated resistance. Staff have different criteria for educational quality from those that guide current FEFC policy and management. Morale of staff is very low, and the energy and will to drive the improvement of effectiveness are sadly lacking. Many, if not the majority of unpromoted staff subscribe to this view.

In planning an agenda for research and development work to improve college effectiveness, we believe it is essential to take both of these accounts seriously. They illustrate a tension in the sector. Both accounts are true, despite the apparent conflict. To neglect the second would be a mistake that might undermine the success of the drive to improve college effectiveness.

In addition, we have identified a marked difference in the major priorities for action of college principals, compared with those of policy-makers. In questionnaire returns, principals identified the major issues in the drive to improve college effectiveness as: lack of finance and funding; poor pay and conditions for staff leading to low morale; lack of management systems and training for middle managers; increased bureaucracy; and the need for staff to adopt new methods of teaching, including the use of IT for college-based and home delivery.

Policy-makers, on the other hand, see the main issues as: student achievement; better matching of students to courses; self-assessment; effective teaching and curriculum. Although there is some overlap in the area of teaching and learning, this suggests that, despite principals' positive view of FEFC, they are not fully committed to the new directions of policy.

There is, therefore, a need to adopt different strategies in relation to some items in the 'Characteristics of frameworks' table (page 49); in particular, the model of change, the culture of the organisation and motivation of lecturing staff. In all these areas, the assumptions of current FEFC policy and practice are characteristic of the effectiveness paradigm. The urgent need is to shift the emphasis towards the improvement paradigm in these areas by:

- increasing staff ownership and participation
- generating professional values
- raising morale through increasing the sense of self-worth.

If this were done without changing the emphasis in other areas, the system would begin to combine the benefits of the improvement and effectiveness paradigms. This is difficult to achieve, but is by no means impossible. ■

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