

Voices of the Further Education Sector:

**The Purpose of the
Further Education
Sector Now?**

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conversation:



#purpose4FE

Foreword

It is over ten years since the Foster Report identified that the FE sector struggled with its own coherence and identify. Many years later, as part of the Oxford University Saïd Business School and the Education and Training Foundation sponsored FE Strategic Leadership Programme, a quick exercise asking participants to identify on a spectrum whether FE was more aligned to private sector commercialism or adding public value revealed a dispersed range of answers which was stark.

A group of leaders from the course have now set out to work on attempting to understand this issue in more detail and begin to take a forward look, as to right now, in the twenty first century, what is the purpose of further education and if it still has intrinsic relevance? Often we continue to attempt to describe the FE sector with linearity, in order to fit a simple government narrative but perhaps FE now faces a “wicked adaptive” environment which defies definition and boundary. This could be argued is good for our students and most stakeholder groups but possibly damaging to providing coherence of identify to Whitehall paymasters, audit regimes and sometimes our customers.

The group have collated, edited and published a series of articles to the sector capturing the voices of leaders within the sector and adjacent groups holding a view ‘from the balcony’. We have tried to choose people who have something interesting to say and have expressed views in the past and cover the widest range of FE. Through a range of responses we will hopefully see a vision that has shared values and congruence, but also watch for the fissures and discontinuity and most hopefully point to future opportunities yet to be explored.

This was not a call for negativity, disownment or harking back to a nostalgic sector long since forgotten or battles lost in the past but it is a call to recognise change, stepping from our current reality and help identify some of the ‘red lines’ that collectively we must seek not to cross in order to flourish but also defend clearly our very purpose, core and identify.

The views held within are not those of the Education and Training Foundation or the Oxford Saïd Business School, but of a collective of individuals who have a strong interest in the future of the Further Education Sector. We would like to thank ETF and Oxford University for their support.

We hope that you join our conversation at [#purpose4FE](#).

Stuart Rimmer, CEO and Principal of East Coast College

Simon Cook, CEO and Principal of MidKent College

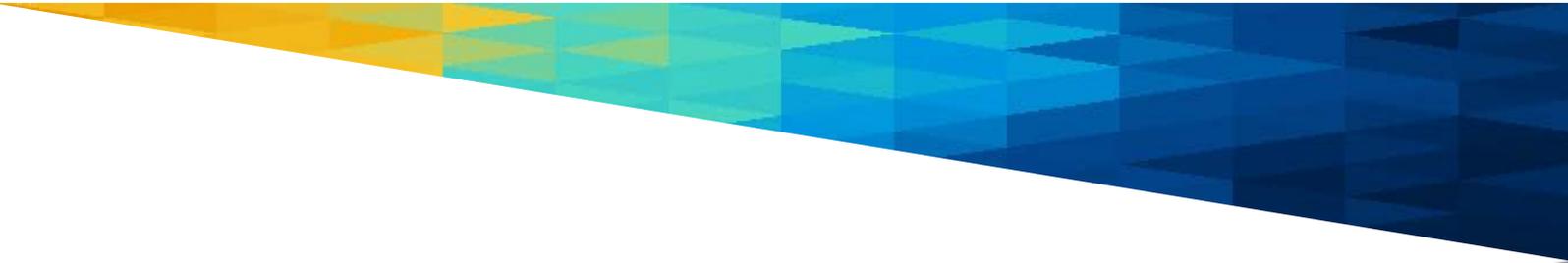
Dawn Hall, Talent Pathways Manager, LOCYP

Grant Glendinning, CEO and Principal, Carlisle College

Ian Webber, Managing Director, InTraining and Rathbone Training



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The FE sector – the past, the myths and the future -

***Written By:* Dr Alison Birkinshaw OBE, CEO and Principal of York College, President AOC.**

York College's history has been carefully documented (*Angles of the Learning Curve* by Avril Cheetham, Kaye Green and Marjorie J Harrison, 2007) and traced back to the founding of the York Mechanics' Institute in 1827. Mike Galloway, the then York College Principal (1999 to 2007), writes in his introduction that he takes 'perverse consolation from the fact this [his] predecessors as Principals [over the past 180 years]...were clearly struggling with many of the same issues (funding, the status of technical education, the need to balance responsiveness and stability) which have marked [his] own period as Principal'.

His comments are telling; 191 years after the founding of the organisation that became York College, we are still trying to resolve existential questions regarding the purpose of the FE sector. However, are we asking the right questions? Instead of asking 'why' and 'what' should we be asking 'how' and 'when'?

There are some myths and legends about the FE sector that need shattering. We are not a Cinderella sector, or not in the sense that is meant. We do not just work with 'second time around' students. We are not too big to care. Our colleges are not places where the 'chavs' go (as described in the days when that term was fashionable). In real life, if we didn't have FE colleges we would have to invent them. In this article, I set out to envisage a new model of FE, which would be set up properly to meet both national and local education and training needs. However, it should be noted that this article is written in a personal capacity and the views are my own. They should not be interpreted as those of either the Association of Colleges or of York College.

In some ways, the Cinderella myth is apt. Many cultures have their own version of this story and it always features an obscure or neglected individual who goes on to achieve recognition and success. So it is superficially a nice parallel, particularly if the latter bit of the tale came about. Moreover, in most Cinderella stories the heroine is a resourceful, tenacious and hard-working individual with some influential friends (animal, mineral and human) who come to her aid when she needs it most. She undergoes various transformations and justice is done in the end. So, we should not focus on the superficial Cinderella myth of FE colleges being squeezed between the two ugly sisters of the school and university sectors. Instead, we should be true to the original meaning of the story - the resourceful sector, which works hard for its students, which transforms itself to meet the needs of its communities, and where justice will come through in the end.

But why should justice come through, what is it we do which merits such a happy ending? Didn't we have our day at the ball in the days of the 1970s and the 'silver book' and have we been paying for it since?

More than any other, the FE sector is, and should remain to be, the glue that holds our communities together and provides the paths to prosperity that individuals and employers need. Whether you look to the nineteenth century configurations of post-16 education and training or that offered by today's colleges the pattern is the same. Traditionally education in the UK moves towards greater specialisation at 16 and because of the changing nature of work and life, adults have always needed opportunities to improve their education and skill levels once they have left full-time learning. Those enlightened individuals who funded the opening of the Mechanics' Institute did so because they believed that all individuals should have access to the 'march of the mind' (actually the evidence also shows that the young also used attendance at these Institutes to gain access to the opposite sex both inside and outside the venues, but that's another story). The shape and expectations of society have changed in many ways since then, but the need to provide full time and flexible education and training at all levels and across a range of specialisms remains. Technology may be now as liberating educationally as colleges once were, but it remains true that much learning needs to take place in groups via social interaction and using specialist and expensive resources.

Colleges, therefore, will need to continue to offer education and training that is liberating. Moreover, there is a strong argument to propose a new transformation for the FE college sector, because the evidence is clear: proper tertiary education is the most successful way of providing the best post-16 education and training for a community, a region and a nation.

Research exists as to the best model for post-16 education, but it is fragmented. This is extraordinary in light of the fact that the Department for Education has had an active policy of opening school sixth forms (extending the age range of 11-16 schools to 11-18) for 15 years and has never evaluated the impact of the 300 new sixth forms that have emerged as a result. There are as many myths around about sixth forms in schools as there are about FE colleges. Andrew Adonis makes unsubstantiated statements in *(Education, Education, Education (2012))* that 'a successful secondary school almost always has a sixth form' (p49), 'sixth forms are the norm in academies, whereas they were the exception in the failing comprehensives which they replaced' (p131), and 'converter academies should have the absolute right to expand and to open sixth forms' (p 197). And the tendency to defend sixth forms on ideological grounds possibly stems from the fact that for elite policy makers, secondary schools are invariably in the shadow of private schools and private schools look up to the institutions in the Headmaster's (and Headmistresses) Conference. Membership of this exclusive institution has been around since 1869 and is only open to schools with a sixth form of at least 100 pupils.

This then reinforces the view that teaching at A level is better for teacher careers, contributes to higher leadership prestige (and salaries) and sounds good to parents.

These claims contradict the evidence available. The Learning and Skills Network's (*Unfinished Business in Widening Participation* (2008)) findings are powerful and worth reading in full. The authors cite evidence which proves that school sixth forms are even less socially inclusive than universities (p.11); that small sixth forms underperform (p. 12); and most powerfully, that those with weaker GCSE grades are less likely to participate anywhere post-16 if they are attending a school with a sixth form than if they are attending an 11-16 school (p 13).

There is also evidence that areas with a tertiary post-16 education system out perform a mixed economy of provision. Research conducted in 2004 (Wendy Pratt, *Diverse Missions: Achieving Excellence and Equity in Post 16 Education*) certainly indicates that this is so, and Mick Fletcher and Adrian Perry in *By Accident or Design: is our system of post-16 provision fit for purpose* (2008), call for the withdrawal of the sixth form presumption that resulted in the increase of small inefficient sixth forms. They also ask that more research takes place on the effectiveness of structures for post-16 education and draw powerful conclusions suggesting that a managed tertiary system is the most effective and efficient way of organising post-16 education in an area.

Evidence is also there on the ground. A good number of the country's top performing colleges exist in areas where there is a genuine tertiary structure to education. East Lancashire, Exeter, Truro and Penrith, all home to tertiary structures have some of the best colleges in the country. Bridgwater and Taunton College is also the home for a National College of Nuclear meaning that coherence and progression can be well managed. In these areas fragmentation, duplication or competition for 16 year olds are reduced. Relationships with schools are strong, and colleges are able to work with schools to ensure that progression paths are effective and careers advice inclusive.

However, not all areas are so lucky. Different parts of England have different forms of organisation for 16 to 18 education. This is the result of history, geography, local politics, competition and top down reform and has been further complicated by the introduction of expensive UTCs, free schools and separate national colleges. We have areas like Kent where almost every school is 11-18 (either grammar or non-selective), but where there are still thousands of young people in the local colleges; or areas like Hampshire where almost every school is 11-16 but there is a post-16 choice between a sixth form college and FE college in just about every town plus a land-based college in the centre of the county. A number of communities used to have a well-planned system but now many of the schools have acquired sixth forms and there are many places where most of the schools are 11-18 and where FE colleges offer the alternative. And in various cities like London, Birmingham and

Manchester, young people have always travelled across boundaries and reorganisations never came to a satisfactory conclusion.

This seems to me to be an extraordinary way of going about the organisation of education to meet the needs of an area let alone a region or a country. Therefore, in a time when funding for post-16 education is severely limited, and scale and efficiency has been acknowledged as the way forward (through the flawed Area Based Review process), decisions on the structures for post-16 education should be made on rational grounds based on quality and the best use of public funds. It is now imperative that thorough research should take place on the efficiency and effectiveness of different post-16 patterns of education. And if, as is likely, it continues to be the case that a true tertiary model of post-16 education and training gives the best deal for all the students (of whatever age), it seems sensible to propose that;

- All 16- 18 organisations (including colleges, UTCs, school sixth forms, national colleges, free schools, 16-18 training providers etc.) should be dissolved
- Post-16 truly tertiary colleges (or college groups) should be established, offering the full portfolio of courses, at all levels and all specialities for 16-18 students. These would include the academic, the vocational, technical and professional and apprenticeship provision, and they would be required protect the minority subjects for their community.
- These tertiary colleges would be mandated to work closely with 11-16 schools, and where appropriate there should be a two-way sharing of staff, expertise and other support.
- These tertiary colleges would also offer a range of higher level technical and professional progression routes through to Level 6 if needed and a range of provision for the adult student, from literacy and numeracy to self-funded and free learning, retraining, distance learning and other opportunities designed to meet the needs of an area.
- A review of the need for national specialist colleges should also be undertaken and a number of the tertiary colleges, probably where there is local need or expertise or resource, should be given additional support to offer the specialist national training for a region or across the UK.
- Transport for all 16-18 year old students should be free.
- Collaboration should be fostered with other providers who would offer progression routes and adult apprenticeships only.

This model is working in some areas of the country already, and these colleges are amongst the nation's best. By pooling resources, reducing the need for competition and investing sensibly we could achieve the very best flexible FE provision in the world, and all our students, whatever their background, would be able to go to the ball.

With thanks to Julian Gravatt at AoC, for his assistance with this article.

The origins of the FE sector began with a clear social and economical purpose. What is the purpose of the FE sector right now? - *Written By:* Ruth Thacker, Course Leader, East Coast College.

Reforms in FE over the last almost two hundred years have always been Social and Political projects; the National Archives identify the proliferation of training and education provisions during this time, including the creation of The Local Taxation (Customs and Excise) Act 1890 which used the revenue collected from the sale of spirits to fund local authorities to provide technical education and instruction (The National Archives (TNA)). This project of developing opportunities for education across the classes has continued and now, the overall trajectory in the UK shows an increase in the number of people accessing educational opportunities for longer periods in their life and a narrowing of gender inequality in the amount of education undertaken (Hood & Waters 2017). However there is ebb and flow within that overall increase, which directly correlates with poverty levels and the amount of public funding directed to education (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2017). The Institute for Fiscal Studies has identified recently that among children, absolute poverty is projected to increase in each English region and nation of the UK (Hood & Waters 2017) and children identified as in relative poverty will rise to 5.1 million by 2021-22, (The Lancet, 2017). The interrelationships between child poverty and educational inequalities are usually discussed in reference to developing countries but recent years have shown a return to concerns with the ability of the UK to harness human capital in the future, should such inequalities persist. However, as Klees (2016) asserts, the billions of under-employed people in the world exist not because they are lacking the necessary skills but because 'full employment is neither a feature nor a goal of capitalism' Klees (2016).

Further Education institutions have traditionally provided education not just for youth but for adults too and this remains relevant for both individuals and local economies; Roser and Ortiz-Ospina (2017) identify that the differences in educational levels can be felt financially in increasingly wider gaps as careers progress. This suggests that FE colleges should be providing not just technically & educationally advanced qualifications but advanced employability skills that focus on leadership, management and personal, professional development. The Emerging Leaders project is funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) but is currently limited in terms of accessibility; businesses based in Norfolk or Suffolk with fewer than 250 employees had only a few months in which to access training (New Anglia 2018) , so - providing these employability skills, as stand-alone achievements, or embedded in all

qualifications and at all levels, might have the effect of improving the potential for career progression and advancing the standing of some employment sectors that

have lagged behind - as repositories for individuals with vision, intellect and influence. This could have the effect of improving the perceived value of some careers that has so far kept women (particularly) in low pay sectors, although, so far, the rise of regulated activity and the demand for professionalization of workforces, for example, in childcare, education and health & social care has not seen much improvement in pay or progression as witnessed in the Low Pay Commission Spring Report (2016).

The role of Further Education as a social project involves concern with welfare. Being a social care provider rather than just promoting wellbeing and signposting to services is a reality for some colleges and training providers (Herd & Legge 2017). FE colleges provide opportunity for social engagement as well as education, and a focus on facilitating low pressure encounters could be better explored as a way of helping individuals overcome the anxiety that appears endemic in young people today but for which very few access mental health support (Reardon et al, 2017). Community cohesion is another factor that is mutually beneficial and which includes engagement with and practice in the community - with services embedded in community and industry. FE colleges need to be heavily involved in driving these developments, not just slowly responding to them. Another aspect of the role of FE in community cohesion is in promoting inclusivity and assimilation of immigrant and minority populations, something that has been reasonably effective in recent years but still requires much work not least because of the fluid nature of ethnic populations and the evidence that students face a constant need to negotiate their positions and face stereotyping from every quarter (Bennett et al 2017).

However, FE involvement in social projects has also meant it has become a victim of regular swings in political ideology; the value placed in supporting social mobility for example is reflected in the value of the funding applied to the sector. As Further Education institutions are the gateway to self-improvement, employment and business development, the role of Further Education providers must then include activism – if as practitioners we do not believe in the value of education to individuals and the economy and that this is inextricably linked to wellbeing, then we are mediocre. FE colleges must be firmly rooted in their own communities and responsive to all sectors of that community. Historically providers have been quite good at that – setting up classrooms in community halls, council offices, shopping centres and youth clubs, bringing literacy, numeracy, ICT and occupational activities to all corners of the locality. While this is still relevant, the fact is most people are now literate and ICT able, what they continue to need is access to work and to qualifications that are informed by employers but can also drive innovation and self-employment.



Further education colleges provide new and technical, vocationally based qualifications, some have their own Foundation degree awarding powers, and this creates much greater flexibility, creativity, responsiveness and reflexivity. A similar approach to more level 2 and 3 qualifications could improve individual opportunity and local economies, not least because the involvement of employers so far in the development of qualifications is proven to resolve the issues of lack of occupation-specific training (Di Stasio, 2017). A 'pick-and-mix' approach to developing

qualifications could improve the engagement with employers, students and the whole community. A greater responsiveness to local market forces but also a greater influence in business development and market changes could take place which should help to resolve the issues in some areas of seasonal industries, high unemployment and low incomes. This could involve providing general diplomas that cross sectors e.g. Art and Marketing, Business, Retail and Customer Care, Beauty, Sport & Health, suggesting the recipients have a range of transferable employability skills as well as industry specific knowledge, something that isn't always clear or realistic about the current range of vocational diplomas on offer.

In summary then, the purpose of FE Colleges right now is in continuing to create their own curriculums, providing their own qualifications focussing on employability skills, helping students to understand the socio-economic machine and barriers and opportunities for social mobility, by helping them to unpick and identify the content of their knowledge and responding to their needs, and by working with employers to shape the workforce, FE colleges need to remain politically relevant and thus financially viable. FE colleges can also reinforce their utility as providers of social support and wellbeing, particularly in meeting current local authority statutory requirements to provide continued education and to meet particular needs for students with EHCPs including those who are 'looked after' and 'leaving care' through enhanced engagement with care services and continued similar work with the DWP. The disconnect between employers and training providers is evidenced by the inability of some employers to identify types and levels of qualification – this is a marketing and communication issue that reflects a weakness in the way some FE institutions manage information exchanges but perhaps also reflects the current reduced status of FE politically and socially.

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Seeking the right question around the ‘purpose’ of further education - *Written By: David Russell, CEO, Education Training Foundation*

An inspiring Principal on Teesside said to me recently “policies, people and priorities change; but place persists”.

This may seem like a truism to those working in FE institutions rooted in their communities; but to me it was quite profound. I have spent 20 years working in national education policy and delivery, where scant regard is given to the role of place. The driving concerns of national policy in FE – as in all public policy – are typically consistency, fairness, targeting based on objective criteria, differentiation according to need. The aim is not homogeneity; but the aim is that all variation and differentiation can be formulated from the centre on the basis of abstractly justifiable criteria, be they quantitative or qualitative.

While this seems like a sound basis for FE policy, it is spectacularly context-blind. In fact in education policy – exactly as in education practice – context is everything. Who is in the room (literally or metaphorically) and what their knowledge, skills, beliefs, motivations, relationships and projects are is the radically determinative context for whether a particular educational policy or pedagogical technique will succeed or fail (or, as is usually the case, fall somewhere in the middle).

All of which has led me to an increasingly strongly held belief that the purpose of the FE sector is not a useful concept; or at least one which constrains as much as it liberates. It is certainly vital to ask: what is the purpose of this FE *institution*? What is the purpose of this *course*? This *provision*? This *encounter*? This *relationship*? This *space*?

But to seek an overarching purpose for the FE sector seems to me to be to seek something which is somehow a different, simpler answer than one would derive by adding together all the myriad purposes and projects of the institutions operating in our sector. If there is such a single purpose, it must be emergent from those multiple purposes; it must not be defined in the abstract and presented as a Procrustean bed into which all comers are gruesomely fitted.

Do you present me with a purpose of the FE sector? I will send for Theseus.

Imagine our society without FE. It simply does not work. -

Written By: Kaye Devlin, English Lecturer in OLASS

Provision in HMP Durham

I recall being asked by a male inmate why I work in a “dead-end job in a prison?” The short-sightedness of his question is one, I hope, will cease with experience, maybe age and, most necessarily, a developing understanding. For while I won't be celebrating a results day every August or patting myself on the back for improved retention rates, I will have opened my classroom door every day to those who could do with a second chance. Or maybe a third or fourth. Thankfully, FE, including OLASS, has long been the home of further chances; an ark where all are welcome to climb aboard and begin their voyage, redesigning their future.

Compulsory education can be, for many, a difficult period of developing an identity and fitting in (or being comfortable in not doing so), unrelenting hormones and a battle of blemishes before the school day even started. Not something a lot of us would want to revisit, and couldn't, because there are no second chances to go back to school. Largely, it is the golden palace of FE that offers another try, or even a first step: an extensive curriculum, a cornucopia of general, vocational and alternative provision. But more than this, FE has shown itself to be malleable, constantly responding to shifting economic and social demands and challenges, because the purpose was and is the people: the sector has a proud tradition of successfully providing an opportunity for them to develop the confidence and skills to make a positive contribution to society.

In a Northern prison, an exceptionally gifted writer, serving time on remand prior to sentencing, jumped at the opportunity to participate in a short course delivered by Criminology students of a neighbouring university. The course served as an addition to the prison's own education provision and was delivered once weekly over one term to students who applied and were successfully selected. The focus was twofold: to allow primary research into why individuals offend and for offenders to have the opportunity not only to have their voice heard, but also experience a taste of higher education. This particular individual discovered a love of writing while inside and the more he wrote and shared, the more he flourished and the more praise he received. He would write a daily diary, among other things, and share his work with his classmates who would look forward to the next instalment. Characteristically, his work was comic in tone and sketch-like, however, on reaching the completion of the university course he had been attending, he became more humble and serious in his reflections. The day before he transferred to his receiving prison, following sentencing, he asked me to read over his latest diary; his intention



being to one day publish his chronicles and become a creative writer or journalist. I struggled to conceal my watering eyes as I read of how grateful he was that he had been able to work alongside university students and lecturers who, he thought, “would never give me the time of day.” He had been praised for his work and

contributions to seminars and he unexpectedly felt respected and that he was of worth. Since settling into his new establishment, he has started to undertake an Open University course in Creative Writing.

In my establishment, students arrive to education prepared, with their folders containing reviews of their progress: some will tell you they’re “the nicest thing anyone’s ever said about me!” They will not arrive with shiny lever arch files from Staples and Sharpies at the ready to colour coordinate their work, and often they might arrive for the first time not wanting to be in education at all, having had negative experiences previously or having a learning difficulty that meant they turned their back on education a long time ago. But in a short space of time, it becomes somewhere that they engage. The main drive is that they engage and engaging in a conversation with another member of the group might be a success for one; for another, perhaps on a greater scale; the learning of a new skill or producing a piece of work they have self-managed from start to finish.

The needs of these often surprising people are diverse and complex. Naturally. The importance of OLASS is that they can have the chance to engage with others when they otherwise may not have been able to: from living on the streets and being unable to look people in the eye, to discussing goals on a one to one basis with a tutor in a room where their work and that of their peers is displayed proudly on the walls. It is a means of hope, that reform is possible because they are learning or developing skills that can be specialist or interpersonal and that, on release, they have options because education and skills refused to write them off; instead, to paraphrase an earlier individual, it “gives them the time of day.”

Ask someone what Further Education is and they might tell you it’s vocational provision, adult and community learning, maybe an alternative to school, but beyond this there is a world made up of people who have changed their lives or found a greater sense of purpose because of it. They aren’t necessarily the shining faces on adverts and billboards but real people living, working and rehabilitating in the communities around us, shaping our society and making the world go round.

Imagine our society without FE. It simply does not work.

A champion, not a purpose – *Written By:* Mal Cowgill, Director, Central Consultants LTD

I must begin by confessing that I am a big fan of Further Education. The hard work, flexibility and all round resilience of the people in the sector continue to impress. The impact on our social and economic wellbeing and the significant return on public and individual investment in the sector makes the question not what is the purpose of the sector but why that purpose is so undervalued especially when it comes to political and financial capital.

Across the range of FE the provision can be used as a force for good. High quality education, second chance adult provision, the critical social value of foundation level education through to high level skills from vocational training and apprenticeships has such an important social and economic benefit, and yet, the FE sector has had a difficult ride since the onset of austerity following a number of years of investment (the capital element sometimes makes the problem worse). The political and financial pressure has been enormous leading to pronouncements on the death of FE and moves in the corridors of power to “dismantle the system” or “bring in the private sector”. (Neither of which, I believe, will work but that’s a discussion for another time.)

So FE has become a national problem. And now we are facing an insolvency regime, a Transaction Unit and a FE Commissioner in an attempt once again to solve the problem. Or at least to push the same solution, remove the chair, change the senior leadership team.

How do I define the problem? Well it is not about an uncertain purpose. All colleges spend time strategic planning to ensure they meet local needs, fill employer skill gaps and such like. There may be a lack of consistency across the sector but most colleges have a purpose they have widely consulted on.

For me FE is about the values and the shared belief in technical skills as a force for good. I believe we should define FE in this way rather than what we do and focus on the local context rather than looking for a national identity. We are not a one size fits all retailer. We are a market that first and foremost serves the local community.

So let us not worry about the purpose because give or take ten percent either way colleges are colleges are colleges. I want to focus on why that purpose is not valued.

So, how do I define the problem? \$\$\$\$.

In my experience colleges struggle financially because 1) they have been encouraged by a previous political regime that urged the LSC to invest in big shiny buildings bringing horrendous levels of debt and interest payments which when coupled with, 2) 30% plus cuts in funding by the current political regime make the mission to maximise student participation at odds with the available resources. Outcome deficits. Was it ever thus? Well yes it was, however, if there were a small number of colleges in trouble I think you would be justified in pointing to poor leadership, a lack of financial skills and a level of naivety in running what is usually one of the biggest businesses within the community. But where do you draw the line? At what percentage of struggling colleges do we admit that this is a systemic issue brought about by years of poor funding decisions? Or more importantly if we valued FE would we really keep saying that this is isolated incompetence or face up to a national funding crisis? Enter the upcoming FE insolvency regime.

Is it me or does it seem a little odd that anyone of any political persuasion would think what this country needs is an open and transparent process for dealing with insolvent colleges rather than promoting a well-funded, well respected sector which can deal with so many of this country's ills and make the whole country an economic powerhouse?

So, why as a country don't we value education more and in particular, the level of technical skills that are at the heart of FE? It is not a cost it is an investment and there are methods of quantifying the social and economic pay back from education for the individual, business and society as a whole.

A better Malcolm than me once said: "Without education, you're not going anywhere in this world." And followed that up with the more precise, "Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today."

I'd like FE be viewed as an investment especially by industry and government. It should not be about politics. It should be about good economic and social thinking. Invest in tomorrow and it will belong to us. Harness the innovation and creativity of this country with the huge resource of technical skills. The added value across all industrial sectors will place our tiny island at the forefront of economic and social cohesion and we truly will be for the many.

As with roads, rail and other forms of transport, FE should be part of our infrastructure and with priority investment because FE is the journey that ends in social mobility through our individual economic success.

That does not mean the sector should not change. Indeed in my experience one of the major strengths of FE is its flexibility and responsiveness. I believe the size of the challenge requires lines to be broken, marks to be stepped over and prejudice to be challenged.



We need leadership acting to promote and protect FE. I can only work on a local level and hopefully help governors and senior leaders dealing with the current world of turnaround. As a recent member of the Institute for Turnaround I am committed to bringing those skills to protect, to grow, to value provision.

I hope amongst the next generation there is a leader who can be an activist for FE and make a difference to the bigger picture. What I do know is the sector will survive, will be flexible, will adapt, will grow and shrink as it has done before. It must do because without FE we are missing a huge part of our social and economic success.

FE needs a champion not a purpose.

We're not Cinderella, we're Mrs Brown's Boys - *Written* ***By:* Ian Pryce, CBE, Principal and CEO, The Bedford College Group**

Do you like Mrs Brown's Boys? Most of my friends find it unwatchable as does most of polite society, the elite. A male central lead dressed as a woman, two-dimensional characters, stereotypes and slapstick humour they thought died out in the late 70s.

Unfortunately for them the programme is incredibly popular, the most-watched show in nearly every corner of the UK, able to command its own Christmas Special. It gives its fans, the public, exactly what they want – belly-laughs that leave them feeling good. It is also a programme that can be subversive in its content and takes big risks. Not many shows have the courage to record whole episodes in front of live audiences on a fixed set.

None of this changes the views of the elite. It simply confirms a deficiency in the people who enjoy it. Elites often dislike democracy and popularity. They know what's best for you. The public can't be trusted to know good TV, good art, good schools, good colleges. But this is the sort of arrogance that also engenders Trump and Brexit if the public gets an opportunity to stick up two fingers in response.

Further Education Colleges suffer in the same way. Since incorporation we have grown in size and popularity. The Association of Colleges tells us there are now 712,000 16-18s in colleges compared to 424,000 in school sixth forms; we have captured nearly 10% of the higher education market despite the restriction of having to get permission from Universities to do much of that; we do huge volumes of the heavy-duty apprenticeships including half those in Engineering and Manufacturing. We've achieved that by being what Dame Ruth Silver calls the "adaptive layer" of education. We are difficult to pin down, quick to respond and to evolve. How many other sectors could deliver hundreds of thousands of GCSEs in Maths and English almost overnight? At last year's AoC Conference Ben Page of Ipsos Mori showed colleges have very high and consistent customer satisfaction scores across all socio-economic bands, results as good as those achieved by the NHS. Sadly that growth and popularity cuts little ice where it matters. We had to get used to a Chief Inspector whose criticism of our sector often wasn't even supported by his own report.

Much recent academic research on leadership and learning has proven the importance of domain-specific knowledge. Hospital trusts run by doctors generally perform better than those run by people with little experience of the health sector. It should therefore not be a surprise that an education department with few people



with any experience of running colleges or of vocational and technical education; or a Cabinet with no individuals who studied such subjects in a further education setting, often make the wrong calls, admittedly accidentally. Employers too lack the specific knowledge we bring. While there is a place for a strong employer voice there is an irony in the CBI calling for a cull of the myriad vocational qualifications (almost none used by colleges by the way) without any hint of remorse that many failed qualifications, such as many of the narrow NVOs, were designed or heavily influenced by employers. The qualifications that have stood the test of time – Degrees, A Levels, O levels, GCSEs, applied generals, HNDs etc – were created and developed by expert educators. Domain-specific knowledge matters.

1970s comedies often featured hapless plumbers, electricians and builders; or made fun of cooking and hairdressing disasters. Such sketches are rare these days because colleges produce so many competent people the sketches wouldn't be credible. Over the last 25 years we have quietly gone about our work producing the people that matter most to our communities – those that build our houses, fix our boilers, our computers and our cars, care for our children and our parents, ensure the planes that take us on holiday are safe and look after us when we get to our destination, cook our special meals, entertain us live and on TV, enrich our lives with their art, cut our hair and make us even more beautiful! The public loves us, we just need the political aristocracy to question the poverty of their thinking, engage with our domain-specific expertise and be as open-minded as the public, treating them and us with more respect. Of course we can still improve, and still have much to do, but there is wisdom in the FE crowd.

FE Needs to Find Its Why - *Written By:* Ian Webber, Managing Director, InTraining and Rathbone Training

Further Education is experiencing considerable change. In England at least, it is becoming progressively more fragmented with funding changes and financial pressures being the primary focus for many. The future is uncertain and difficult to predict, with scenarios which were seemingly impossible becoming increasingly plausible. However, huge amounts of time, energy and money have been invested in long term solutions which have delivered only short term impact.

'You can't go wrong with bricks and mortar,' has been a security blanket for many organisations over countless generations. Shiny and new always attracts but such a patina invariably fades and where the underlying sustenance is insufficient, those myopic gains will forever be consumed by the accounts. Do not be fooled by folly.

Only time will tell if mergers generate real synergies, release previously untapped potential or create true economies of scale ... all for the benefit of the consumer of course. Has failure in the system only been delayed in order to create the potential for bigger failures where only the lawyers and bankers will emerge satisfied? For now, and for some, the lights have remained on. However, there was no crock of gold waiting and those who find themselves in this place are realising they are simply back to where they started.

The way forward is also unlikely to be found in Whitehall. Relying on fundamental system change which may be within one's influence but way beyond one's control is unlikely to lead to timely success. Energy spent tugging on ideological heartstrings is best spent elsewhere.

The real answers are inevitably far closer to home and should cause us to reflect on core purpose ... the why? The origins of FE are entrenched in uniting the needs of people and employers in their local communities for economic and social benefit. Such purpose is as clear and compelling today as it was over 100 years ago.

First and foremost, FE must demonstrate value and relevance to its learners and employers; they will ultimately decide and increasingly have the ability to make better informed and more discerning decisions. If you are not intimately aware of your learner and employer requirements, then ultimately you will fail.

Typically, learners want education to be a positive experience and don't want to be burdened with debt. They value work experience and want a job at the end. Employers want workers who can contribute quickly, who have the right attitudes and behaviours and who have adaptive skills enabling them to respond to the

changing needs of the business. And so, delivering qualifications is clearly not the purpose of FE.

Many FE organisations do have vision and mission statements, developed through lengthy consultations with multiple key stakeholder groups. The outcome has resulted in a level of ambition-lacking banality that fails to provide any point of differentiation. Swap mission statements between organisations and nobody would notice. Critically, there is very little that resonates with learners and employers. Whilst the purpose of FE is clear, most FE organisations need to develop a clearer sense of identity and direction.

Survival during periods of uncertainty requires agility. FE has typically bound itself by geography, buildings and provision. Such things are becoming increasingly less important to the consumer and failure to at least explore the alternatives is a signal for the death toll.

Lines between the adjacent markets of FE and HE are blurring as players put a toe in each other's pond. Vertical integration of this type is a strategy which leverages core competencies and resources; it helps balance risk as well as opening up additional revenue streams. Competition between neighbours will inevitably intensify and the lines of demarcation between FE and HE will become increasingly irrelevant.

Beyond the qualifications, FE needs to develop good citizens with a great work ethic. Whilst such things can be taught, they need to be ingrained within the culture and ethos of the organisations. This is the essence of the sector and therefore represent challenges of leadership rather than simply those of curriculum and HR.

Progress in technology, not least virtual reality, will mean that very high quality, socially engaging learning environments will be accessible anywhere, anytime, at relatively low cost. In addition, the ambition of technology organisations to become education providers represents a huge competitive threat to traditional players in FE. Recent history is littered with captains of industry claiming technology would never replace them. There is an urgent need to be able to deliver the very highest quality of teaching and learning in a digital and virtual age.

In absence of rigid or even coherent government policy, what works, or at least what has worked in recent living memory, is unlikely to be *the* solution moving forward. The system is open, consumers have choice, change is inevitable, new approaches and solutions are required.

The need to define organisational rather than sector purpose with relevance and ambition to local learners and employers is greater than ever. Improving the quality of teaching and learning with a focus on outcomes, not qualifications and success rates is key, and investing in digital delivery not shiny new buildings will yield greater returns.

Defining Further Education: Does it matter? – *Written By:* Martin Doel, CBE, FETL Professor of Leadership in Further Education and Skills at the UCL Institute of Education

There is no commonly accepted definition of further education (FE), with the term being used to embrace provision that ranges from foundation learning for adults to higher apprenticeships, as well as academic and vocational education for young people from age 14 onwards.

Professor Martin Doel argues in his first professorial lecture, as the FETL Professor of Leadership in Further Education and Skills at the UCL Institute of Education, that this lack of definition does have consequences in terms of a lack of agency for institutions and organizations classed as FE providers, in inconstancy of government policymaking in this area, and in the resources allocated to post-16 and adult education.

However, deriving an all-encompassing definition may be impossible to achieve in a way that is meaningful and useful. The alternative for those providers currently classed as being a part of the FE sector, most particularly colleges, is to more carefully define and describe their own distinct individual purpose as an essential part of local educational and social ecosystems.

Martin Doel briefly summarizes the issues facing the FE sector in this podcast and video of a session recorded at Jeffery Hall, UCL, February 2018.

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news-events/events-pub/feb-2018/defining-further-education-does-it-matter/>

The FE sector, as a whole, is about second chance – *Written* ***By: Ruth Brook, independent education and business*** **consultant**

The FE sector, as a whole, is about second chance, real life learning applied to practical work and skills needed to survive throughout life and work.

Post 16 education that is based in reality not theoretical academia. Usually based on work place practice, work experience or on the job training so all theoretical input has a direct practical application and relevance.

Second chances are not usually what the politicians and policy makers have had experience of or appreciate the need for with adults / post 16 yr olds to re learn some basic skills and unpick some of the damage unfortunately inflicted during the statutory schooling process. Many politicians/policy makers went straight from A levels at 18 into university and into the public sector employment – no second chance required.

The resurgence of apprenticeships, heavily influenced by employers, has refocused FE and is allowing the sector to both meet government targets as well as responding to the localism agenda aligning training with employment opportunities – win/ win!

Everyone deserves the chance to engage in learning at any time. Learning keeps us vital, curious, mentally active and an active member of our society. This is particularly relevant as we get older as the mental health benefits, social interaction and just the reason to get up and out engaging within the community keeps us independent and valued. The funding for this sort of learning is crucial but in many cases the outcomes are health related and should be funded as such?

The state funded education system from nursery to GCSEs and A levels – as good as it may be – will never meet the all the needs of all the people all of the time. Therefore it is essential that there is ongoing post 16 education available for all those who didn't flourish or didn't achieve their potential during that statutory time. Many were not receptive during those vital years and it is only as they grow and mature that learning and education is seen as something that they can value and see the relevance of. People learn best when the time is right, when they need skills or knowledge for a reason which motivates them to overcome perceived barriers which enables them to take that leap back into the learning environment. FE are so skilled at supporting returning learners to gain trust back with the system and nurture and challenge them to engage and achieve.

FE can deal with young adults as well as older adults in a more equal partnership, recognising that learners are "customers" and as such will walk if the learning



provision isn't meeting their needs, if they are not dealt with as an adult often paying for the experience and certainly giving their own precious time to engage – even if it is for their own benefit. It is a different dynamic from the school sector where children and young people are obliged to be present.

The Government MUST recognise the unique provision that FE offers and delivers year on year –responding constantly to both government policy change and local demographic and employment dynamics. This is done whilst still raising achievements.

We all do not learn in the same way nor are we receptive to learning at the specific time it is offered/ delivered. Children and young people are often dealing with huge emotional issues as they grow up which has negative impacts on their ability to learn. We all need another, open ended offer to enable us to learn when the time is right for us as an individual, whenever that is throughout our lives. This can be for the basics eg maths and English, for employment, promotion or for our own enjoyment, stimulation and satisfaction. This is why FE in the broadest sense is so vital a service throughout our lives.

- Second chance/new beginning for 16yr olds
- Adults relearning the skills they missed or were not able to access at their time at school
- Learning for wellbeing, pleasure, mental health and social interaction
- Apprenticeships and employability,
- Local economic vibrancy, community cohesion and engagement.

What's not to like?

Fostering Better FE - *Written By: Andrew Thomson OBE,* Director, Excellence First Enterprise Consultancy, former CEO Association of Colleges Eastern Region.

“Above all, FE lacks a clearly recognised and shared core purpose”. The main conclusion Andrew Foster reached in 2005.

The purpose he then described for FE was to play a bigger part in enabling the UK to catch up with competitive international economies – with a focus on skills and employability.

What happened? The report fostered little of a ‘shared core purpose’. Rather, its main impacts (cutting back on quangos, a doomed venture into ‘self-regulation’, the 157 group) made it look like “FE” meant only the supply side.

But if you look at things in terms of ‘brand’ – as Andrew Foster did - it’s as well to understand that brand isn’t something you decide (logo, strapline). It’s what people say about you. And that is to do with the impacts you have: we know what a ‘Rolls Royce’ solution is....and what (insert brand name) it isn’t.

Many colleges have described their aims, before and since the Foster Report, in terms of being ‘outstanding’ or ‘first-choice’. But what is the good of either for a business or a student? They are at best measures of things that just about might matter to the customer; they are, in fact, about institutional advantage.

The thing FE institutions should be encouraged to concentrate on is their impact. And the focus should be on generating social and economic prosperity.

This means working with the right partners - business, government and public sector - to address the key local issues. And these issues are economic: creating wealth (employment; up-skilling people, supporting business innovation, productivity and growth); and saving costs enabling people to improve their capacities to lead more productive lives).

To operate in this way means looking ahead, seeing intermediate-term challenges, working out how and why the community needs an institution to help face these. And then providing this, working out a way to tread the often difficult line that understands that the client (the funder) and the intended beneficiaries (the student, the business, the community) may want different things from the same fund.

There is, of course other pressure to act in more in the short term than with a longer view.

Inspection has a habit of driving orthodoxy that militates against innovating. And funding regimes have seldom if ever encouraged real forward-thinking. And then there's national initiatives, which tend to accentuate short-term (and, often, questionable) gain as a prize above anything for which it might have been better to wait a little time.

The Area Based Review process was the latest such action, to try to tackle the main challenge identified by Andrew Foster. It seemed conceived it was conceived and enacted on the basis of cutting cost rather than adding value. Cut the debt, watch the bottom line, stick around a bit longer. And its focus was again on supply: a network of sustainable colleges.

It is a limited approach, being cost-driven. You can sell things in of two ways: on quality or on price. The brand of FE needs to be sold on quality – of impact. The focus should be on the top line, the ways to enhance it and the means to add value through the ways the work is done. Value-driven is the better option, struggle though it can be to see it.

What was required by Andrew Foster, and what is still needed, is a clear connection in the public mind between the investment and the outcomes of FE.

Is the country going to have better skilled people more able to meet the demand of a high value-add economy – capable of sustaining our assumed quality of life needs into the future as labour decentralises to lowest cost and digitisation disrupts at increasing rates.

Where are the skilled technicians coming from to make this economy work - and what is the fate of over-supplying graduates to be under-employed in the economy?

What should be done?

At a simple level, develop a funding model and an accountability measure that fits the need for the FE system to be driven by outcomes and rewarded for achieving them. Then focus on creating prosperity.

Like many who are contributing items for this project, I have travelled fairly widely in the past decade, in Europe and Asia. I have been lucky to work in a long series of projects taking me into the world of industry / business / policy / technical education. The perspectives you and I have are shared by those we meet, and there are lots of clever people about who think a great deal about the matters before us all here.

Does this give any clues to answer Andrew Foster's central question about the main role for FE in England? Maybe; and it will not please everyone to read it. But, where models in which the investment – impact relationship seems to work better, you



can't avoid seeing that intelligent municipal or national government has a greater stake in the way [are FE institutions](#) are run.

It's not the American Community Colleges model so beloved of some at the launch of the Foster Report. But its focus is on outcomes for public investment first, institutions second; and the importance of the core purpose of FE – to help create social and economic prosperity.

What is the purpose of FE right now? - *Written By:* Grant Glendinning, CEO and Principal, Carlisle College

The 2017 Association of Colleges Conference saw a Leader of the Opposition address FE delegates for the first time. In his keynote speech, Jeremy Corbyn referred to his vision of a 'National Education Service' which a serving labour government would establish. This bold vision of free, lifelong education for all sparked an array of questions to form in my mind, and no doubt the minds of all listening, and a refreshing exploration into the hypothetical: how could incorporated colleges fit into such a Service? Would a Service be provided through centralised planning and control? What forces would then be in place to ensure quality and drive efficiency? Could colleges remain autonomous and independent? Where could marketisation begin and end? Would colleges fit in between schools and HE in the Service? Which parts of the education and training ecosystem would they be obliged or allowed to serve?

In fact, my questions led me to consider the existential purpose of further education in the round, and I am certainly not the first from the ranks of college leadership to do so. Why termed 'further' anyway? Is it 'further for those whom you would naturally have expected education to end'? Or 'for those in roles where additional 'education', not provided anywhere else, is required'? Of course, with the vast multiplicity of learning programmes which colleges undertake, any generic label or title could clearly not successfully describe it. Like me, many FE college colleagues will recall failing to explain adequately what UK FE colleges are in conversation with overseas interlocutors from countries where a close parallel does not exist. Which led me to consider: are we working in a 'sector' at all?

This final point can be partially answered by the bold fact that no UK college has truly divorced itself from government control. We are, and as long as we exist under our current design, frankly dependent on state funding falling down slots which purchase certain qualification products as outputs, be they study programmes, diplomas, apprenticeship standards or futuristic T Levels. It is no surprise that alternative engagement is described as 'income diversification' in colleges' parlance, and in reality, it is just that. However, in my mind, to extrapolate from this fact that colleges then fulfil a 'sectoral' function in the country's education sphere, in the same way that schools do, leads to an over-simplification. The same would be true of the university 'sector' I would hasten to argue. So then, what is a purpose of FE?

It would be true to say that college leaders and corporations share a fundamental mission, and that is ensuring that their college earns its place in the next chapter. Consider the catalytic effect of 2015 Area Reviews and the resulting 48 college

mergers. Intentionally or semi-intentionally, the reviews' stated aims achieved Machiavellian results, with some colleges deciding their fates in response to threats from 'unenforceable recommendations', thus giving rise to an enthusiastic adoption of the multi-academy trust model, up and down the country. To my thinking, this calls further into question a notion that colleges, if never unbridled from powerful stakeholder pressures, could ever be relied upon to provide a 'cradle to grave' Service.

In truth, the variation in markets and the communities served by colleges is too wide. Whilst 'General FE' may provide some homogeneity of programmes between institutions, the forces experienced by institutions will differ markedly according to their contexts, and a college needs to make sense of the limitations and possibilities within its unique sphere; there will of course be overlap in offer between rural, land-based and inner-city colleges, but more prevailing and decisive will be their necessary specialisms. Operating on, say, the West Coast of Cumbria will provide a greater measure of prescription to your curriculum than most colleges located in London experience. Evolving from this will be developed strengths and weaknesses, and strategic objectives which will dictate organisational structure, economic logic and resourcing models. In many colleges, their 'strategy' will set culture and a perceived mission, which in turn may also decide the volume, nature and scope of provision offered.

It is clear to me that in the journey on from incorporation, localism trumps nationalism for any college. As publicly-funded bodies, FE colleges do remain very much subject to wider national policy change and national priorities, such as apprenticeship reforms, qualification change, the founding of National Colleges and Institutes of Technology and so on. However, change must be interpreted to suit a college's particular reality and potential. So whilst the purpose of FE will be somewhat defined by ministerial steer, an individual college should create its own script: whether that be a 'dual mandate' for both technical education and providing for those whom school has failed, as eloquently once described by Vince Cable, or the productivity-enhancing antidote to the UK's inexorable languishing towards the lower end of league tables, and a critical part of the pathway of the Industrial Strategy - arguably a helpful, post-Brexit proposition.

Ultimately the FE 'sector' has purposes, in the plural, which are more determined by local demand, reputation and economic logic than anything else. Consider the relative ease of developing an apprenticeship offer for a college serving a part of the country with a substantial manufacturing base or regional industry, compared to a London college where service industries, and great competition, dominate. Without a seismic shift in paradigm, which I would guess Jeremy Corbyn was promising, colleges could never truly be incorporated into a National Service.

An FE Story - *Written By:* Simon Cook, Principal, MidKent College

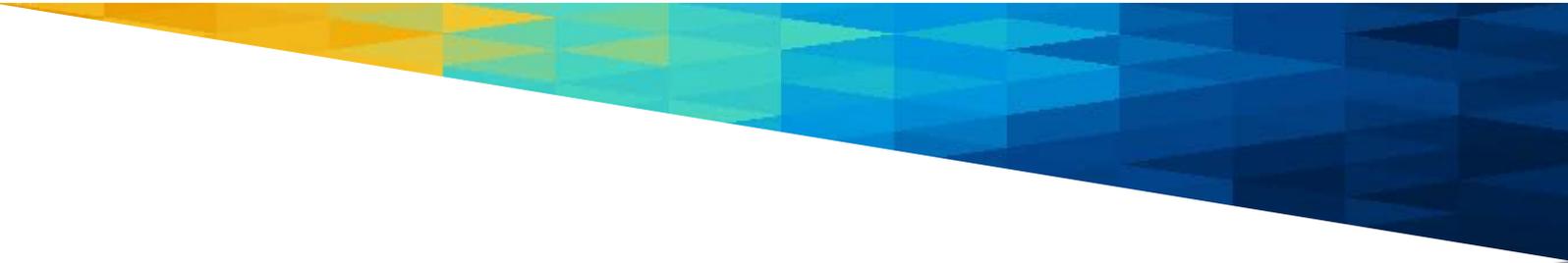
Belinda turned to me and said "Why don't you consider teaching, we all love our time with you".

She was an apprentice, working with me in one of the finest hotels in the world, just outside Cape Town. I recall the moment well, Belinda was responding to a conversation about what could I do that gives me such enthusiasm, passion and joy as working in hospitality.

Opening up my own restaurant in South Africa, or working in another country was the exciting alternative. However, just over 6 months later, and I am back in the UK talking to a lecturer at my now local college about teaching part time. He worked closely with apprentices in the hotel I was working in. His eyes lit up when he heard about my career to date. Of course they would, a young man having worked in some of the worlds best hotels and restaurants wanting to get into teaching!

Over the next 2 years I then embarked on training to become a teacher, whilst working full time within a hotel who supported my ambition to get into teaching. I learned, and fought hard against, the theory of teaching, but loved being in the classroom. After 2 years I made the permanent switch and secured my first full time job as a teacher, in 12 months I was asked to become an advanced practitioner, then I became a team leader. In 2004, 5 years after I returned to the UK I was appointed into my first senior leader role, leading a faculty outside of my own background and expertise. I recall sitting in the car park seeing another candidate for the role, and thinking. Crikey Simon, this is serious stuff now! Then in 2013 I was lucky enough to be appointed as Vice Principal, and then in September 2017, 19 years after that conversation with Belinda I was given the privilege of leading a college as Principal and Chief Executive.

This is not a story of self-indulgence, however one that epitomises what we do in FE and why we do it. My own personal journey was not one of second, or last chances. It was one where I had opportunities and without FE, would not have found a way to make the most of those opportunities. From the beginning as an apprentice where at college I developed skills and attributes I never thought I had, to the period in Germany where I came into contact with their technical education and the esteem within which it is held in society, learning to become a "Master" of my craft. Upon returning to the UK where I was able to train alongside my full time role to make a career switch, through to undertaking my first leadership training at a college. FE for me has created opportunity.



It is also a world of incredible diversity. A cross section of a local community, with young people, adults and employers all working together. You will see ambition, you will see hope, you will also see many people who just simply do not yet realise their potential.

Now that I work in FE I realise that it is full of individual, powerful stories. FE is not just a job, it is a passion a purpose and why I do what I do. It is about changing lives, creating great individuals who will transform the world and its about hard work, determination and transformation.

What's our Space? Creating direct community benefit - *Written By: Stuart Rimmer, CEO and Principal, East Coast College*

Beginning a more meaningful debate about the purpose of further education and whether we are prepared to invest in it and *how* as a nation we value in this resource is helpful. The improvement of social mobility, and implicitly, the reduction of inequality and substantially improving wellbeing surely should be a measure as to whether further education is working?

Qualifications are very important, as they are the portable currency of our current understanding of education. But a better consideration might be asking - what do students actually need? As educators it is arguably our moral responsibility to solve the answer to that question first. The role of a qualification will only be a narrow and single dimension for success; so what else?

Challenging the ability to deliver academic success alongside the development of a student's character and wellbeing are intrinsically linked. They are not to be bolted on as an afterthought or a 'nice to have'. The development of character and values must sit next to, and interact with, the technical or academic training.

Ask any employer what is it that they are interested in when recruiting. The discussion will always begin with a technical description but very quickly moves to discussions of teamwork, honesty, enthusiasm, socially able to interact, taking responsibility and those first levels of the expressions of leadership. Ask someone what it is to be a good friend or neighbour. They will give you a similar list.

The underfunding of the sector leads to focus in efficiency but rarely effectiveness. We are often isolated in our own colleges without looking out at a joined up system. In a strong system we would create strong bonds from pre-school through to postgraduate study. Whilst we can prove some technical outcomes have been improved, we often fail to ask the questions 'who has been left behind?'; 'at what future costs?'; 'are *all* students able to achieve their potential to lead rich and fulfilled lives?'

Current obsession, expressed by local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) and government departments is one exclusively, and sadly, of economic impact. They talk endlessly of skills gaps in strategies, dangers of unemployment (rarely under employment) and the 'necessity' of growth (economic not human). Some of the answer to close the productivity gap is development of skills. If we have skills shortages then we must only have skills training, which is dictated exclusively by labour market information and employer led organisations. This is a sound argument *if* the sole purpose of education is providing a compliant, well drilled and competent workforce to only support industrial aspirations. But if we wish all our citizens to be happy and flourishing, if we desire lower crime rates, better social cohesion, increased social

mobility, richer arts and cultural contributions, improved fitness and physical wellbeing, better mental health outcomes, then we *must* set aspirations higher and broader.

To achieve the first set of aspirations could be seen as to only require a “skills factory”, industrial input/output model. The second requires meaningful engagements within the challenge of developing character and wellbeing. Helping people live smarter and more grounded lives. To build foundations of strong mental resilience. To better understand our strengths as much as understand our weaknesses. This must exist in values led institutions focused on education not just skills.

In terms of wellbeing, colleges could and should help learners develop their self-awareness, and understand preventative strategies to genuinely, and with confidence, deal with the ups and downs of real life. It requires support, good teaching and sophisticated learning. The cost of doing this early on might mean an increase in overall cost of education but the long term benefits should be obvious. Thus a broad education is a social investment. The question begins to emerge ‘what are we willing to pay for?’ and ‘how can we more sensibly measure best public value?’

Therefore the space in which colleges must operate should have the social benefit as its priority function, directly connecting to have immediate and sustainable individual and community impacts, the only true performance measure.

Furthermore, if we spend more time focusing on the broader aspects of an education then I believe that academic success and technical proficiency must follow. We must want our young people to be higher in the happiness tables, achieve better academically, based on their potential and not where they are born, and enjoy economic prosperity in meaningful and varied lifelong work. To do this, for me, the answer is simple – let’s bring back a balance between skills and education in our colleges, and let us ensure that sufficient reward is provided for these more positive social aspirations.

Stuart Rimmer wrote a love letter to the education system and a relationship that has lost its way, exploring the need to change; asking both parties to stand back and think what’s best for our new emerging 21st century future. He suggests we have been disconnected from teaching some of the necessary skills that it takes to be happy human beings. To watch Stuart Rimmer’s TED Talk video “A Love Letter to Education”, please follow the link on:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVWTM3aC-c&feature=youtu.be>

Further Education- four decades of continuity in an era of change. A personal perspective - *Written By:* Colin Luhrs, Assistant Director, Projects and Apprenticeships, Carlisle College

For many who have been engaged in an occupational area for a number of years there is a tendency to look back with rose tinted glasses to a previous golden era, overstate the impact of current issues and point to the future with a sense of foreboding. There will be none of that here! Indeed after 41 years involvement in FE as a student, lecturer, manager and professional I would suggest that FE has provided a sense of continuity to stakeholders whose own circumstances have, and continue to be, far more prone to external fluctuations that we have been.

Thinking back to the start of this period, 1977 was an interesting time, Google images of "UK in 1977" and you will see what I mean, it looks like a different world: the fashions, news, personalities, news, advert etc. Inside your local FE College however much of what we do would be instantly recognizable then and now.

A high proportion of students are still attending as part of an Apprenticeship or work based programme, whether new entrants to a trade or profession or working towards Higher Level qualifications. Learners and employers continue to see the local FE College as their chosen partner in skills development.

Others not yet employed are looking to enter the world of work after accessing training and education in vocationally specific sectors. At any FE College they will have access to industry standard equipment, workshops and systems. Their tutors will be vocational experts with technical currency and links to many local employers.

Some learners will be pursuing an alternate route to Sixth Form and be aiming for University or, increasingly, Higher or Degree Apprenticeships. Their local FE College will provide the rigour to meet these aspirations with the freedom to stretch and develop.

Throughout this period, FE Colleges have been at the forefront of enabling students to engage with social change in a positive and pro-active way. Recently introduced sessions covering for example, the Respect Agenda and Equality and Diversity are not a new idea. For example, students back in the 70's covered topics as diverse as the increasing role of the EU, Equal Pay Legislation and other issues society was facing. The effect of this on generations of students cannot be measured, but its wider impact on social acceptance and inclusivity cannot be ignored.

Most FE delivery is also an early adopter of new ideas; IT applications in commerce, automation in industry, productivity of the British economy for example. Themes from the 70's? Or from this year? More likely throughout the whole period, as well as before then and into the future.

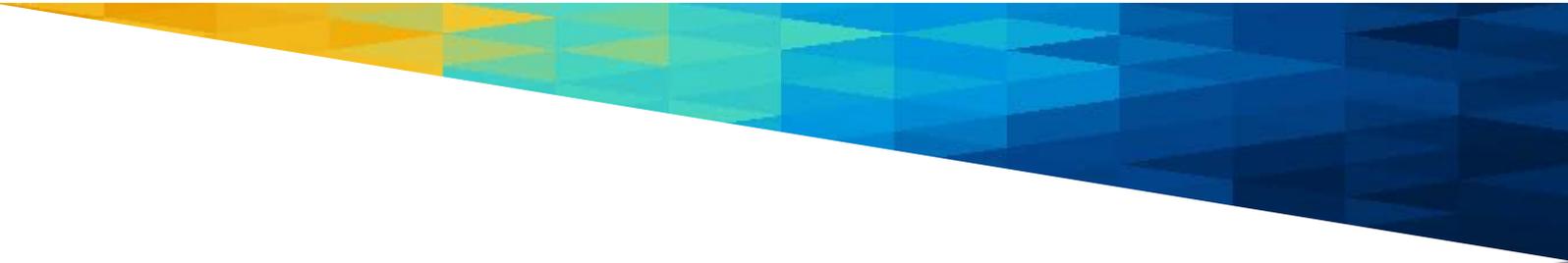
Employers too continue to support FE. SMEs in particular often recognising that taking part in a structured course as part of their development really empowers staff and contributes to Companies' skill-set. Within many classes, learners share developments in their sector which in turn spreads new and best practice, either between students or via interacting with the tutors.

The Curriculum, the Apprenticeship and HE offered in most FE Colleges will similarly reflect local specialisms and employment trends. Almost uniquely, this expertise will frequently be made available to industry partners and other institutions via professional groupings and informal networks. In many cases this even extends to aspects of a Colleges Full-Cost provision, as long as the partner enquiring is not too local! Within my own role in Business Development I have always been able to resolve employer enquiries after making a few calls to other Colleges. As a resource for local companies this continues to be a valued, but often un-stated role we play.

If the examples above sound like four decades of uninterrupted joy, I apologize for glossing over the wrong turns and blind alleys that we have dealt with along the way. There have, of course, been huge changes in society, the economy, technology and lifestyles in this period. Within the FE Sector however many of the changes we focus on have been politically influenced and also have two things in common. To identify them initially, the biggest influences on FE in this era have been in chronological order, the introduction of NVQs with associated funding, the incorporation of Colleges, the increasing role of Ofsted, the introduction of Learner Loans for individuals and the Levy/Co-I Investment model for Apprenticeships.

So what do these have in common? With the possible exception of the impact of Learner Loans on Adult Learner engagement levels, it is clear that firstly employers, school leavers, parents and other stakeholders have continued to engage with FE at similar levels despite these factors. Secondly, FE providers have consistently and skilfully adapted to meet these national challenges whilst ensuring the core "product" remains attractive and beneficial locally. This sort of adaptation will be critical in re-engaging with the thousands of adults we have lost over the past decade. It is currently driving a widespread re-evaluation of the Adult Apprenticeship/Degree Apprenticeship offered in many FE Colleges as learners, parents and employers respond to the new possibilities.

At this point it would be tempting to continue listing the immediate challenges facing FE eg. Brexit, UK productivity, the implementation of T Levels, another funding crisis approaching etc etc. We could then discuss and propose solutions to each of



them. Space precludes this, and anyway we would end up with a series of measures based upon the same principle:

FE survives and prospers when we understand national issues and develop skills based programmes, which connect local stakeholders, individuals and employers to their mutual benefit.

After forty years and nearly a thousand words I feel that I haven't really added much to our collective mission statement, but I would hazard a guess that in 2058 much of this will still apply.

Whatever the purpose – we need colleges to act more collaboratively and collectively - *Written By:* David Hughes, Chief Executive, Association of Colleges

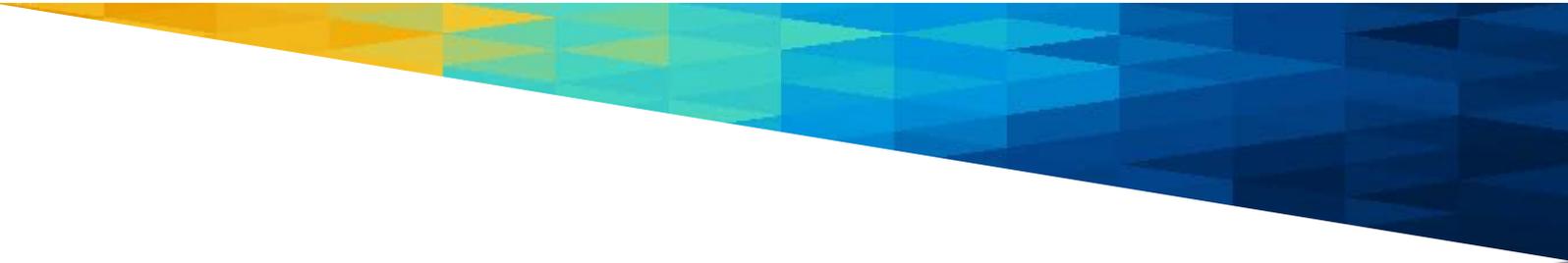
The debate about the purpose of colleges will probably continue for ever. That's not peculiar to our sector; others have the same existential angst either continually or episodically. Just take a look over the fence at universities which have done so well for so long without seemingly worrying too much about their purpose. They are worrying now and having to work hard to define a purpose which others will respect and support.

In the college world, we have not been so fortunate in terms of understanding and respect, so the issue of purpose has always been to the fore. For me, colleges are all about transforming lives and supporting their communities (in the broadest definition of community). How those two play out for each college depends on history and context and every college I've ever visited has its own unique take on it. That said, I do think this definition and promotion of purpose is a weakness. So, I'd like to propose three areas college leaders can focus on to help promote a better understanding and a greater respect for colleges: personal responsibility, strategic communications and collective action.

In all of this, I fully recognise the important role we have at AoC to help change things. But we cannot do it alone. AoC has a leadership role in all of this, helping and supporting college leaders to develop the narrative, the confidence and the resources which can be used. We are also adept at making the case for colleges in Whitehall; but that case is so much more powerful when AoC members from across the country are aligned on the same messages.

The first area for college leaders to focus on is personal responsibility. It's clear that colleges have been hit harder than any other part of the education system and that times are very tough indeed. It's too easy to fall into a trap as a leader to complain and rail against the injustices. My plea is for all of us to rise above that and to exercise realistic but optimistic leadership. We need to show the way through the tough times, talk up the impact colleges make, attract others to work with us and to be clear that the purpose of our colleges is to help build a better society and a stronger economy.

With that in the bag, college leaders can then devote resources to the strategic communications which will help secure the place of the college in its community. It's not enough for colleges to do amazing things, make a big impact, help people



transform their lives and employers become more productive. Colleges need to plan how stakeholders and partners will get to know about it. This area of strategic communications is not about marketing to potential students. It's about a systematic approach to building relationships with key influencers in the community and it's important because it is the bedrock of a strong reputation. It's about securing a place and a space for the college in its community.

The third focus for college leaders builds on this – collective action. Of course there is competition between colleges, but unless and until we are able to promote, celebrate, applaud what other colleges do, we'll never shift the image and reputation to where we want it to be. Working together, college leaders are a powerful force and can have a strong voice. We all know how great colleges are, but we need others to know as well and then to speak out and become advocates. College Board members, students, staff and employer partners can all advocate for colleges collectively and individually if we engage them effectively.

That's a lot to do, but worth it if we get it right. As leaders we need to be confident, self-assured, inspired and inspiring, with the energy and enthusiasm to engage others. I've yet to meet a college leader who is not proud of their institution – so let's use that pride to build understanding and respect for all colleges as true social assets, offering opportunities to all and transforming lives and communities



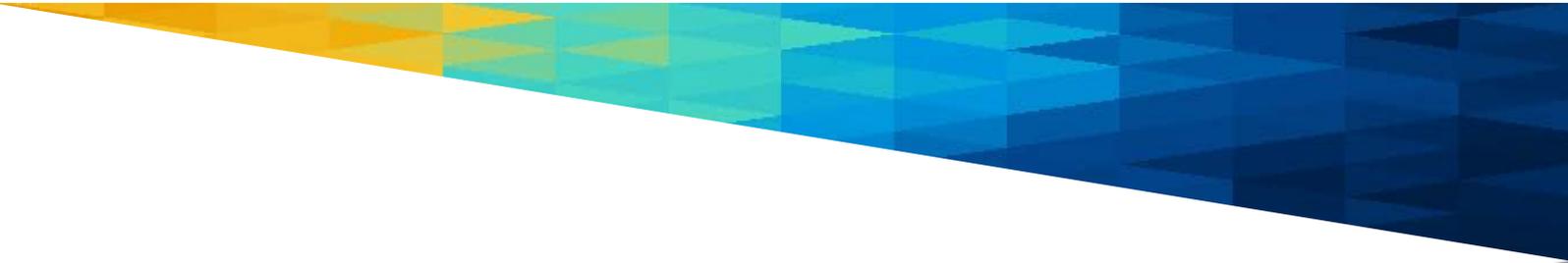
Adult, Family & Community Learning – Raising Aspirations, Building Confidence and Transforming Lives - *Written By:* Dawn Hall, Talent Pathways Manager, Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council and National Chair of FLLAG (Family Learning Local Authority Group)

Adult, Family & Community learning (commonly known as ACL's) is a vital part of FE provision and of the future landscape. It is in a unique position to meet the local needs and demands of its community. As in most cases it is not bound by buildings meaning that excellent partnership work is essential in order for delivery to take place. Staff are deployed or located out in community venues (including a local prison in my service), allowing for positive relationships to be built with learners, the community and local employers. ACL's have proven results of reaching the most disadvantaged and disengaged learners who not would otherwise have engaged in education.

For many learners it is often the first step of a learning journey since leaving compulsory education. There is consensus in ACL's that 'we are all in it together', there is no 'them and us', thus offering a safe environment for learners to develop and enhance their skills. ACL's are learner focused, and for some learners, employment is not yet on their radar. When I first joined adult learning someone told me that 'learners may be able to get on the motorway, but may not be able to drive straight to London'. This is so true of many of our learners; they need to build confidence, self-esteem and resilience.

ACL's have a highly qualified and skilled workforce, who's offer generally includes English, maths, ESOL, Family Learning, Employability and a varied and bespoke Community Learning offer. Family Learning is unique as it offers intergenerational learning opportunities, raises aspirations and improves the life chances of families. Parents are willing to attend a course that will help them to support their child's learning but would not have otherwise engaged in learning for themselves. Once engaged a large proportion of these learners continue on their own learning journey, often achieving a qualification for the very first time.

Government policy is focussed on retraining, upskilling and getting learners into employability, however, providers are penalised for getting learners into employment through their retention, achievement and success rates. We need government policy to support delivery outcomes rather than be a barrier against them. A major change in this paradox could be devolution of the Adult Education Budget. Sheffield City Region (which my ACL service is part of) is proposing a 3 year



delivery plan. This should allow for real progression opportunities to be planned, delivered and evaluated, rather than working within the current constraints of year on year funding.

The Sheffield City Region (SCR) delivery plan to implement the SCR Industrial Strategy will provide a framework of delivery with key partners, such as Team Doncaster, that will underpin inclusive growth and progression opportunities for all – such as high quality education, progression to employment and be able to sustain that employment. This will provide a platform for individuals to reach their full potential and contribute to the economic success.

ACL's deliver a holistic approach, enhancing health and wellbeing, reducing dependency on public services and addressing multiple agendas through cross department collaboration. ACL's have been improving social mobility long before the publication of the governments Social Mobility Strategy and will continue to do so long after the strategy is archived. Doncaster is designated as one of the 12 Opportunity Areas, and I firmly believe that adult learning is integral to the success of the delivery plan to raise aspirations for all.

ACL's are full of passionate individuals who truly want to make a difference and improve the lives of their local community through learning opportunities. I should know, I was one of those learners who were supported and encouraged to embark on a career in adult education. I think the phrase is 'home grown'!

FE and the future – new opportunities at local level? -

***Written By:* Professor Ewart Keep, Director of the Centre on Skills, Knowledge & Organisational Performance, Department of Education, Oxford University**

What is FE there to deliver? Primarily two functions across a range of age groups – firstly, the supply of vocational skills, broadly defined and traditionally largely below degree level; and secondly the provision of second (or beyond) chance learning. In some countries these two roles are undertaken in different institutions, in others they are combined (see Gallacher and Reeves, forthcoming). The second function looms large in England because our lower secondary school system does not perform well across the ability range and a considerable volume of post-16, upper secondary phase learning is remedial, and also because many employers now have a limited commitment to retraining and upskilling large sections of their adult workforce.

Given these two core functions, what opportunities are there for FE to find its place in the policy sun? My answer would be that one important opportunity comes in the shape of the devolution of the Adult Education Budget (AEB) and the emergence of city deals and an industrial strategy that stresses the need for local economic growth delivered through locally-devised policy interventions. Thus seven of the Combined Authorities (CAs) have been charged by central government with developing their own localised version of the national industrial strategy. These developments have coincided with a major push, led by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and others, around the need to promote fair work and better quality jobs in order to tackle in-work poverty, social exclusion, un- and under-employment, weak social mobility and limited pay progression.

As a result, what can already be seen in some of the more sophisticated and better developed CA plans, such as Greater Manchester and Greater London, is the emergence of a new policy agenda based around socially inclusive economic growth and fair work which plays to both of FE's core strengths. Thus Greater London is developing policies and strategies that span and link up fair work, inclusive economic growth, and skills. These developments mirror what has already occurred in Scotland, where the government has made major efforts to integrate skills policy and delivery with the work of its economic development and business support agencies, and to create a national Labour Market Strategy that helps link skills to job and pay progression, better utilisation of skills by businesses, re-training workers to meet challenges posed by economic change and new technologies, retaining older workers in employment, etc.



The proposition from and for FE goes thus - the devolution of the AEB openings up some space for experimentation with a local skills 'offer' that is more closely integrated with a policy focus on inclusive growth and improved job quality. At present, there exists a spectrum of different models of how skills policy should be structured at local level. At one end are traditional and rather tired skills supply models that put most of the attention upon matching demand and supply at local and occupational levels, and also on a belief that more skills can on their own deliver economic revitalisation and greater social mobility. In other words, it is a miniature version of policies that have underlain England's fairly unsuccessful national-level skills strategies for three and half decades or more. Some localities are clinging on to this model.

At the other end of the spectrum are new approaches that argue that both economic success and greater labour market progression are likely to be delivered only when skills policies are closely tied to interventions concerned with economic development, innovation, business support and improvement, and with policies that explicitly seek to deliver inclusive growth and fair work - i.e. better quality employment (for an overview see Green et al, 2017). It has also been argued (Lupton, 2017) that in addition to linking up skills with other policy areas, education itself will need to adopt a more integrated and sophisticated approach that embraces human development across the life course.

FE is well-equipped to help deliver many elements of this new, more integrated policy model. It knows how to offer re-training and upskilling opportunities; it has strong links to local communities and a track record in engaging with individuals and groups those otherwise lost to education; it has contacts with local employers, especially some of the SMEs that other networks struggle to engage with; it often undertakes quite a lot of under-the-radar business and innovation support services to local business; its delivery models are usually more flexible than those of schools and universities; and if it is nimble it can move to fill the significant gap in sub-degree (Levels 4 and 5) provision that national policy has finally woken up to. The concept of FE as local economic and enterprise catalysts and hubs has been around for a while. The new policy focus on local economic development and socially inclusive growth provides the perfect context to develop this opportunity to provide local leadership and to meld together its two main roles.

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Further and Adult Education – The Nations Fixers - ***Written By:* Dr Susan Pember, Director of Policy and** **external relationships at HOLEX and former Governance** **Advisor to the AOC**

Further and adult education is the life blood of this nation. It has never worried me like it has others about FE status because the people who need to know us know us. Having spent 9 wonderful and challenging years as the college principal in Canterbury, I was confident that everyone who lived within East Kent knew what we did and how to contact us. I never gave much thought to words like 'Cinderella Service' and, if I had, I would never have attached that name to my college, my students or my staff. Our role was to work tirelessly for the residents - adults and young people who lived and worked in our catchment and ensure they had the best chance possible to succeed. When people think of Canterbury, they think of the affluent South East but many of our students came from the most deprived areas of the country. Therefore, even more pleasing when our fledging college rugby team beat the grammar schools.

Although I started my career in teaching, I moved into the adult and college sponsor side of local authority work and loved that job but, it was to be taken away from me when FE became incorporated in April 2013 and although I could have stayed and become a schools officer my heart is in FE and it now seems really strange that 25 years on, local authorities will have a new role through devolution. Maybe I should have stayed after all. My boss at the time wrote in my leaving card "a college is a good safe haven for the time being but the policy will revert. So keep an eye on returning". I don't think he thought it would take 25 years.

Devolution is real positive step - well it will be once the teething issues are solved and the new staff realise working in partnership with colleges and providers is, in the long term, the easiest and most effective option. Further and adult education are about local people, people who are committed to a place and want to learn locally - so devolving of budgets make sense. But, the model we have adopted is not really local and if we are not careful we could just be replacing one bureaucratic administration with another, which is just as far away from the realities of people's lives as the one we presently have. To be really effective we must put the individual first, and to do that we need to know what they want and therefore we need to be really local and place centred - but one step at a time.

Further and adult education is key to Britain's future success. Devolution is coming in at a time where we are stacking up issues which are going to look to education and training to solve. With an increased level of focus and resource, adult education can meet these challenges. The main issues we should be focusing on are:-

- raising productivity through improving the basic skills of employees – we still have a situation where one in five of our workforce has low English and maths skills;
- strengthening community cohesion by providing guidance, support and a place for communities to learn new skills together;
- increasing social mobility through providing induction and stepping-stones programmes that lead to qualifications with a progression route to further study and improved job prospects;
- reducing unemployment and inactivity by identifying and supporting people back into education as a pathway to work;
- enhancing progression into well-paid jobs through providing retraining schemes when and where people need them;
- extending working lives by allowing the older person to learn new skills such as IT;
- tackling health and mental health issues through providing a protected environment to gain confidence, self-esteem and new skills;
- attracting future inward investment – adult education can provide the skilled workforce which, in turn, encourages international businesses to set up here.

Adult education is very resilient, even with the lack of resource in recent years we still have an FE and adult learning infrastructure in England of which we can be proud - they are the fixers. For example, driven by self-leadership, adult and community learning providers continue to educate and reskill over 500,000 learners annually and are able to demonstrate they are the best educators. Ofsted grades last year show that 80 per cent of those inspected were 'good' and student feedback excellent. These providers are efficient, using their state funding to generate fees and co-funding. They are fleet of foot and move where the need is, whether it be to support a new developing community or an employer having to make staff redundant. They are not hampered by having to keep big buildings going or layers of costly managers and overheads. They are student and community centred, professional, well qualified and determined. They are our unsung heroes and, by hook or by crook, we need to create the political circumstances for them to use their skills and knowledge to educate and retrain more adults. This is the new sector leadership challenge.

Adult education must/ will be central to the nation's success. It is for us to lead, to demonstrate confidence, foster new advocates and publicise what we know works.

What is the distinct value of Adult Community Learning? -

Written By: Gerald Jones, Head of Adult Learning,
Lewisham Council

Adult Community Learning, like FE and other AEB funded provision, helps adults rebuild their lives and develop essential core skills that they might not have had; it reaches people during some of the most vulnerable periods of their lives; it offers opportunities for the retraining and reinvention that modern society and the modern economy demands; it contributes to broad civic outcomes including health, wellbeing, social cohesion and integration as well as economic and employment outcomes; it enriches communities and as a result it enriches the whole country.

But ACL is not like other AEB provision, it plays a completely different role to that of Sixth Form Colleges, and a very different role to that of FE colleges.

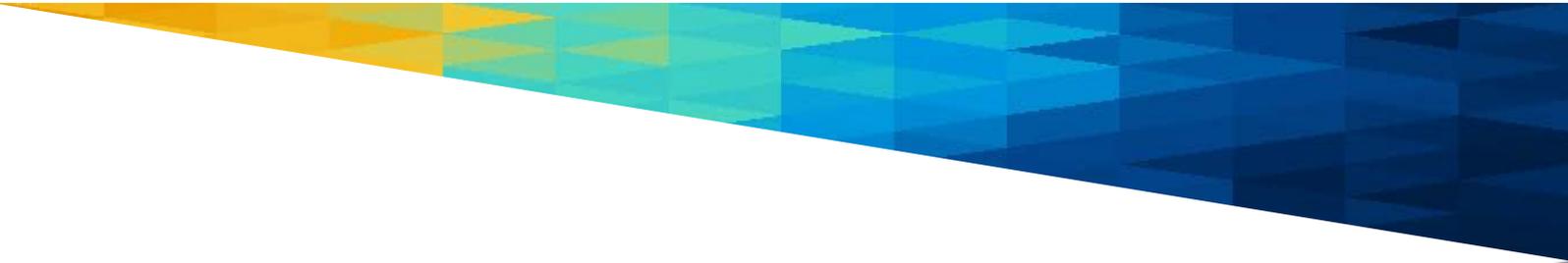
So what is different about ACL, and why should it continue to be valued as a distinct activity within the broader adult education budget?

1. ACL offers multiple routes to address the critical question 'How can we flourish?'

The primary goal of ACL is to enable individuals and their communities to flourish. This has been the purpose of ACL across the country for over 150 years, and it has a tradition of providing multiple routes of achieving this goal - the sector has flexibility, innovation and problem-solving built into it. Even before the First World War the rationale for funding ACL was seen as broader than achieving narrower employment outcomes (although these are critically important) because people can be in employment but still not flourishing, still a burden to society, still a cost to the economy (most commonly they may be on in-work benefits, or in ill health which is costly to councils and to communities).

ACL is often, wrongly, thought of as nice-to-have, or side-lined as an indulgent pursuit for those with time and money to spare. But ACL is complex – as complex in fact as the lives of the people who participate in it. Reviving the dulled metaphor of the skills ladder can help shine a light on the complexity and multiple purposes of adult learning.

Imagine a ladder. Imagine now that the act of climbing this ladder enables us to reach the goal that we all are striving for, namely to flourish – in the deep Aristotelian sense of living well, doing well and faring well.



The starting rungs of the ladder are, for most of us, the foundations of our life, the skills and qualifications we gain in school and university. The middle rungs of the ladder are where we build those skills and apply them in work and in our contribution to society. The final rungs of the ladder enable reflection, consolidation and far-sightedness of our later life.

We know that the first rungs of the ladder are missing for many people – those without the skills, the language, the confidence or the good luck that other people have had. ACL constructs multiple routes which lead up to the first rungs of the ladder: the elevators and escalators, other smaller ladders, staircases with very small steps, helium balloons that lift you up, tunnels that emerge from underground but which take you to foot of the ladder. ACL creates all these different routes; it constructs them carefully with partners very close to the communities (other council services, the 3rd sector and local organisations and businesses), and it coaxes, ushers, pulls, pushes, invites and tempts people to step up onto those first few rungs of that ladder.

But ACL also casts a watchful eye over those people on the middle rungs, providing support and delivering courses for those who are in danger of falling. Even the most successful people will encounter mental ill health at some point in their lives, or will suffer family or individual crises, or be in danger of redundancy, or will get ill, or feel isolated from their community as it changes or drifts away. All of these put us at risk of losing our footing on the ladder, of losing our way, our job, our confidence, our motivation. ACL builds small steps, platforms and safety nets alongside these middle rungs, so that people have the opportunity to retrain, to rebuild and reinvigorate themselves – thus continuing to contribute to society without being a burden on it.

Finally it is ACL who help people to continue to flourish even after they have moved past the crucial middle section of the ladder. Our learning and contribution does not stop once we have retired, and ACL helps older people to keep healthy, to reduce loneliness and isolation, to maintain wellbeing, and keep people active and engaged to the end of their lives, which at the same time helps to reduce the costs to the state.

In contrast to the complex civic role of ACL, the routes and the goals of FE can be seen as more focussed – although they are just as important – addressing the critical stages in life of skills and work. They do not have the funding flexibilities to provide multiple routes for everyone, they are not as close to the doorsteps of local communities, and their goals are primarily about the middle section of the ladder, i.e. the ‘next rungs’ needed to help people into employment and training.

2. ACL creates a safe Gateway to learning.

It takes courage to learn. Learning can feel like you are placed in a position of vulnerability, you are admitting there is something you don't know, or can't do. Learning can feel like you are relinquishing some power, giving it to the tutor or the institution. Learning carries with it baggage and memories that may be painful. Yet adults who return to learning are free not to do so, they have escaped the tramlines of compulsory education. Those who do return are embarking on an act of courage that must be reflected in the ethos and structures of the learning provider they enrol with.

ACL provision is expertly placed to help adult learners across the threshold and back into learning. Adult learning provision is local, it is familiar, it is communal and has a community feeling and ethos. Adult learning provision is not full of young people who may be seen (wrongly) as intimidating in their liveliness, group tendencies, behaviour and numbers. Adult learning provision is smaller than FE, it tends to be calmer, and able to create a learning environment that feels safer for adults, particular vulnerable adults or those who have had those negative experience of compulsory education. Adult learning provision creates a safe learning environment through a deep understanding of the needs and concerns of adult learners, and has structures in place to secure that safety.

FE provision can be perceived as large and boisterous and institutional and many people taking their first steps back into learning, including those most vulnerable (and those with hidden vulnerabilities) simply won't cross the threshold into an FE college. Without the 'multiple routes' onto the ladder offered by ACL, which compliments FE provision, these people would not be able to get onto the ladder to flourishing.

So ACL is an essential means of helping people across the threshold to learning.

3. ACL works with local partners to create a curriculum that reaches deeply into communities.

It is true that there is a difference between ACL provision within a local authority and ACL in the form of the Institutes for Adult Learning (previously the Specialist Designated Institutes). But my experience of working for years in brilliant Local Authority ACL providers, and for years within brilliant IAL providers, has been very similar.

Because the goal of ACL is to enable people to flourish, and because flourishing is something we strive for throughout our whole life (not just when we are of a working age), ACL builds partnerships that reach deeply into communities. These are not the

more focussed employment-related partnerships of FE providers (who want and need to attract people onto those middle, working, rungs of the ladder).

ACL provision, such as the provision here at Adult Learning Lewisham, creates a vine which wraps around statutory services – those with already deep reach into communities – and through the flexibilities it has in creating a curriculum that supports the goals of those services it strengthens and adds to them. This partnership work includes the following services here in Lewisham Council: public health, adult social care, children schools and young people, economic development, housing and regeneration, community and culture. ACL partnerships with local authority services typically have the following characteristics:

- They are more immediate (as ACL services are the colleagues of all those other services).
- They are more strategic (as ACL are contributing to outcomes for residents, just as those other services are).
- They are cost saving (the 'upstreaming' work of adult learning contributes to savings in public health, to adult social care, to people claiming housing benefits, in reducing multiple deprivation).
- They are aimed at the same extensive range of vulnerable residents (including all those listed as priorities in the ACL report – all of whom are also being reached by other services, but *value is added* to the work of each of those other services once learning is included in the opportunities for those residents).
- They are sustainable, not temporary, (both services will be in proximity to one another, and sharing the same values and same goals for years to come) nor are they dependent on a particular funding stream (I worked on the Non-Schedule 2 pilot projects, with the homeless sector, with FE colleges in the early 2000s – projects which came to an end once the pilot and the funding ended).

4. ACL enriches our culture

This is not a popular perspective on adult learning, and it won't win any arguments in the Treasury; but this is an historic argument that should not be forgotten: adult learning is of value in-itself, not just as a means to employment. The issue at stake here is: what sort of society do we want to live in? There is something about a culture which promotes lifelong learning, lifelong curiosity, lifelong creativity and lifelong challenge through adult learning; something in that culture which makes it special, which makes it proud, which makes it a culture we want to live in. Imagine a culture



without those things, where learning is purely mechanistic or utilitarian, purely directed at narrow ends - whether these ends be economic, social or political - and you are not far from the totalitarian catastrophes of the last century. Or imagine a culture where only those with the money to pay were able to be creative, enrol on arts courses, watch and analyse films, study philosophy – where only the elite, who have always had access to this broad curriculum, could benefit because only they could afford the fees. Many are now concerned that we are not so far away from this elitist society as we had once hoped.

Even in times of national recession, during the First World War, during the 1920s recession, during the Second World War, during Austerity, during the 1970s oil crisis, people from the poorest of socio-economic backgrounds have been able to afford access to this broad curriculum – not just the rich. (I'd recommend reading *Adult Education in Inner London 1870-1970* by William Devereux to get the long view on this).

Conclusion

For the people engaged in adult learning there is something magical about it, something that animates their lives in a way that nothing else does. And that is because learning is difficult – it is hard to bite into the gears of learning, but the satisfaction that emerges from that effort is untold. The true outcomes of adult learning, aside from the skills and civic benefits outlined above, really are immeasurable for the individual who is affected by those outcomes. They are life-changing, transformative – and they transform our culture too.

And that is why ACL is worth funding – this transformative effect should be available to all adults, not just the deep-pockets of the middle classes – and only the continued public funding of adult learning's kaleidoscopic curriculum can make it so.

Robert Halfon MP – Adapted from speech to the Learning and Work Institute February 2018 - Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, Conservative Party, Former Minister of State, Department of Education, Apprenticeships and Skills. Chair of the Education Select Committee.

Our skills problem is a social justice issue. While the lack of skills in society ultimately touch us all, our most disadvantaged individuals pay the highest price. They have the most to gain from skilling their way out of deprivation, but are the least likely to do so. This is plain to see across our schools, where millions of disadvantaged children are on a collision course with failure. Just 33% of pupils on free school meals get five good GCSEs, compared with 61% of their better off peers. Without a solid nucleus of skills, it is hard to thrive in the jobs market. Instead, the most likely outcome for these individuals is a grim concoction of wage stagnation, fading hope and inertia. We can change this.

To spark a skills revolution, we must first transform the way we view education - it is customary to talk about building “parity of esteem” between technical and academic education.

But pursuing “parity of esteem” reinforces the split that exists between them. It implies a division between the two routes when in fact, they should be seen as intertwined - two parts of the same system of self-improvement, and both equally well supported.

Education should be a continuum of learning. This means:

- one train-line with a series of academic and technical stops;
- the ability to jump back on and travel to other stations to build credits and reskill or upskill; and
- all without fuss within a seamless infrastructure of opportunity.

First, let’s look at post-16 technical education, the government is starting to create more connectivity between academic and technical education through its post-16 Skills Plan. The Plan will produce a much smaller number of qualifications (T-levels) in 15 different clusters of skills. These qualifications will have a standard currency that the thousands of existing qualifications currently lack. And pupils will be able to move between technical and academic routes through bridging provisions.

We need to make sure everybody gets the basics right, around nine million of all working aged adults in England have low basic skills. And a third of 16-19-year-olds



have low basic skills. Literacy and numeracy are the bedrock of academic and vocational success. Without them, it is hard to build a skills-set that will unlock higher value jobs. Can be a vital player in helping the current and next generation build the basic skills they need. However, rather than swallow valuable resources by insisting on retakes for those who fail English and Maths (with failure rates of over two thirds in each case), we should be offering these individuals functional skills courses to improve their basic literacy and numeracy.

We should also capitalise on the enormous potential of apprenticeships. Apprenticeships can bring excellent returns. 90 per cent of apprentices go on to a job or further education. But, all apprenticeships must deliver a top-rate return. 48 per cent of apprentices are not in good or outstanding provision. The government should urgently review the sector to ensure we are providing quality as well as quantity. We also need to be smarter about how we use the new Apprenticeships Levy. We could, for example, introduce a taper allowing employers to pay smaller contributions if they develop apprenticeships for disadvantaged pupils, and if they address skills shortages. Once we are clear about what works best, we could then make a powerful case for expanding the levy.

We need more balance in our higher-level offering so that there are pathways into intermediate and higher technical education, we have become obsessed with full academic degrees in this country and we are creating a higher education system that overwhelmingly favours academic degrees, while intermediate and higher technical offerings are comparatively tiny. The labour market does not need an ever-growing supply of academic degrees. Between a fifth and a third of our graduates take non-graduate jobs. The “graduate premium” varies wildly according to subject and institution. For many, the returns are paltry.

Instead, there is enormous opportunity in rebalancing higher education. There is a strong need for intermediate skills. There are skills shortages in several sectors. And there are millions of people who want to get on in life – preferably without a lead weight of £50,000 dragging from their feet.

If we are going to continue to lavishly furnish universities with taxpayers’ money, we need to think about how universities can specialise in these areas. Existing universities that do not provide a good return on academic courses could reinvent themselves as centres of technical excellence.

And FE colleges, which are ideally placed to offer flexible and local options for those who need this, could be better supported and incentivised to deliver intermediate and higher technical courses. Either way, we must urgently redirect some of this funding towards courses and degrees that have a technical focus.

We can also be creative about blending technical and academic education. Degree apprenticeships are a remarkable example of a vehicle that does just that.

Degree apprenticeships could be the crown jewel in a revamped technical offering.

Students earn as they learn, they do not incur mountains of debt, and they get good quality jobs at the end. They also help us meet our skills deficit, so they benefit society too. I want to see more universities offering these apprenticeships. There are currently just 11,600. I hope that one day, half of all university students are doing them. The government should incentivise their growth. One way to do this would be to ringfence some of the enormous public subsidy that still goes to universities, so that universities can only draw down on this protected funding stream if they offer degree apprenticeships.

We could also use the £860 million outreach budget more effectively. There has barely been any growth in state-school students who start full-time undergraduate courses (just 0.1% more in 2016 compared to the previous year). In nine of the 24 Russell Group universities, the proportion of state school pupils actually declined. Why not use some of the funds to promote degree apprenticeships? However, this is not just an issue of supply. Few families are aware of degree apprenticeships, especially from disadvantaged families where the returns could be most profound. Both the existence of apprenticeships and the value they bring should be hard-wired into careers advice.

Academic study at universities should be just as accessible, regardless of background for individuals to make informed choices about academic courses, we must be transparent about the return they will bring.

The way we recognise universities is all wrong. We place far too much emphasis on research excellence, and not enough on teaching quality and employability. Universities are an integral part of the machinery that feeds into the jobs market. It is reasonable to hold them accountable for the extent to which they prepare students for the world of work.

In part, the problem is nestled away in the system of incentives we have created for our universities. They are rewarded disproportionately for the research they do, rather than the teaching they offer or the employability skills they confer. Membership of the Russell Group is widely seen as a proxy for elite performance, and the branding power this brings is substantial.

While some Russell Group universities deserve their recognition as elite institutions, others appear to trade well on their brands, while their less reputable counterparts remain unrecognised, but of the 59 higher education providers that received a gold standard in the government's Teaching Excellence Framework, 51 were not in the Russell Group.

Portsmouth University came top of the Economist's "value-added" university rankings, which compares graduates' wages with what they would have been expected to earn if they had not gone to that university, Aston University came second in the same rankings and both received gold in the government's Teaching Excellence Framework.



These universities deserve all the prestige we can muster. They are powerful engines for social mobility and put rocket-boosters on the life chances of those who may otherwise have stagnated.

It is time for a broader measure of success. In future, the Teaching Excellence Framework will build in new data on graduate outcomes. I strongly welcome this and look forward to these playing a larger role in how universities are valued. Over time, this framework could be incorporated into a broader, more holistic, official league table. To build a continuum of learning, we must also make it easy for people to learn flexibly throughout their lives and for those who are not able to build high value skills the first time around, or whose skills have been wiped out by a fast-changing labour market, it is important that our system offers a way back.

As Open University's model clearly demonstrates, flexible learning can be a powerful vehicle for social justice.

Its students are not required to have completed A-levels (or equivalent qualifications), and so prior achievement is not a hindrance to personal development. It is able to reach some of the hardest niches within our system and is the primary provider of higher education in UK prisons and secure units. Its flexible online learning model makes higher education possible for those who live in areas where there is no local university.

The mere idea of taking one penny away from the flexible/earn and learn sector, while continuing to prop up mediocrity in some of the traditional sector, is scandalous. Flexibility is a vital part of continuing learning. We need to protect the sector and we can start by ring-fencing the Part-time Premium element of the Higher Education Funding Council's Widening Participation funding allocation. It is also vital that we create clear routes from further education into higher education. These could be supported through 'Next Step' loans for individual higher education modules.

Good education is the high-speed train that propels social justice. But it needs a proper line. And a series of stops that lead to thriving, dynamic places of opportunity. Not deserted platforms and decaying stations. For that to happen, we must craft a more fluid and balanced system. And we must build excellence all along the way.

I invite you all to join me in driving this vital agenda forward.

Closing Comments

Firstly, we wish to thank the contributors that created such a rich cacophony of voices and variety of solutions to our posed question. Also thanks to Oxford Saïd Business School and Education Training Foundation for enabling us to come together to define this asset for the sector. We hope that this creates further discussion in senior teams, board rooms and within college communities.

If any theme can be drawn from our contributors it must be that the FE sector is something that continues to have a refusal of formal definition. Despite not having the congruence of some other sectors, what is clear is that the sector is firstly a necessity, secondly requires continued support through funding and involvement. The third aspect is that whether the sector is defined either by itself, or others, is that, it must be trusted in its organic development. The sector has grown over a century and continues to find its own way. A conclusion could well be that whilst nationally the sector refuses its constraints of definition the community in which a college or provider sits and the stakeholders that use it will provide definition. This is one of local value and therefore local meaning.

This opens us up to a rich but manageable task which is to meet face to face our locality; as we have always done and directly engage with communities we serve. If we accept that the sector is both significantly fragmented and sadly now sitting in a full education 'market' then if we don't meet the very local need then there will be more risk on the horizon.

The unintended consequence of being unable, except in the broadest terms, define ourselves is that we are not funded at a local level but still must have national engagement with people in positions of power rarely understanding what we do locally. This 'lobby national, deliver local' will no doubt continue to trial and test us in coming years.

At our heart remains the need not to leave anyone behind or displaced in the market settings of our work, and that colleges and providers must continue proudly with the social missions that they often set for themselves and engaging this social entrepreneurship. Often doing the work that others may not wish to do nor even see the need to do.

A coherent national definition therefore may not be important but our purpose and necessity calls more loudly than ever.

Best Wishes,

Stuart Rimmer, CEO and Principal of East Coast College
Simon Cook, CEO and Principal of MidKent College
Dawn Hall, Talent Pathways Manager, LOCYP
Grant Glendinning, CEO and Principal, Carlisle College
Ian Webber, Managing Director, InTraining and Rathbone Training

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conversation:



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