FURTHER EDUCATION
TRUST FOR LEADERSHIP

RETHINKING PLACE AND PURPOSE:
PROVOCATIONS ON THE FUTURE OF FE

A FETL provocation by Martin Doel

PROVOCATIONS

The meaning of the term 'provocation' is usually understood as 'incitement', something that provokes, arouses or stimulates – a message in search of a response. This series of short FETL papers has this in mind. Their aim is to stimulate interest and debate, to air a new or original idea with a view to eliciting thoughtful, open-minded responses. As with all FETL publications, we do not seek to offer the final word. We are all about what happens beyond the page, in the wider life of an idea. We hope readers will take them in this spirit and share with us their own ideas and responses and, indeed, their own provocations.

FOREWORD

Dame Ruth Silver

I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute the foreword to this valuable short collection of essays and provocations written by Martin Doel. Martin was appointed FETL Professor of Leadership in Further Education and Skills at University College London Institute of Education in April 2016, having served as Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges since 2008. The idea behind this unique new position – the first of its kind, we think, anywhere in the world – was both to enhance the reputation of research into leadership in FE and to bring Martin's significant experience and policy knowledge to bear in the generation of fresh, new thinking about the sector. These essays, prepared as prompts for roundtable discussions, demonstrate the kinds of questions Martin has been asking of the sector, while the transcripts of responses give a useful snapshot of current and emerging thinking among colleagues.

Like the professorship itself, the roundtables represented a serious attempt to bridge the divide between academic thought about the sector and the practice of those engaged in the day-to-day business of leading learning in further education. This is an important endeavour, which FETL is keen to support. It is important both that research is informed by the real experiences and issues facing the sector, and that further education, as a sector, learns from and contributes to scholarship, in order to better influence and shape its own future.

The issues Martin presented at the roundtables have become increasingly relevant, and are at the heart of much of the best and most promising current thinking about further education. The sector's purpose and mission is again under scrutiny, with a number of high-profile commissions of inquiry considering the future shape of FE. Place will inevitably be an important dimension of the outcomes of these discussions, as we consider how best to strengthen and develop the important role played by FE institutions in their local economies and communities. And, as we once again reflect on the future shape of technical education, and consider how best to develop it, place and purpose in FE will be at the forefront of our thinking.

These essays and discussions give a sense of where we are, as well as some ideas as to the kind of future we might forge. They point, importantly, to the need for greater collaboration in the sector, not only between further education institutions, but also between FE and other education institutions, with other key local stakeholders, and with employers. This, of course, is only possible if we share a sense of common purpose and some core values. This can be difficult if we do not fully understand our own. As Martin notes, the intention here is not to offer conclusive answers. As with all FETL's work, the aim is to provoke further discussion and further ideas and learning; not to draw a line under debate but, as Paul Klee had it, to take it for a walk. We very much hope this short compilation will be read – and thought about further – in that spirit.

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

PREFACE

Martin Doel

With the pressure of emails, meetings, deadlines and constant change, time for reflection is in danger of being marginalised. This is particularly true for those working in further education (FE) in the face of exceptional funding pressures, policy turmoil and the need to respond to wider societal change, locally, nationally and globally. It was with these pressures in mind that I convened a series of roundtables in my role as FETL Professor of Leadership in Further Education and Skills at University College London Institute of Education.

Each of the roundtables brought together academics working in the field of FE and skills, practitioners and leaders from the FE sector, and current or ex-policymakers. The meetings were informed by an essay from me, what I termed a 'provocation', with potential questions for discussion; the conversations that followed were summarised by a rapporteur. The essays, provocations and the recorded conversations are contained within this publication.

The issues considered by the roundtables and the mode of discussion were intended to go beyond the 'surface' and allow for reflection on underlying concepts. The first roundtable considered prospects for collaboration and competition in further education in the face of what are sometimes overly simplistic conceptions, on the one hand, of a 'neo-liberal hegemony' and, on the other, a similarly crude belief that the 'magic hand' of the market would guarantee quality and sufficiency in further education.

The conversations at this first roundtable pointed to 'place' as the most likely unifying concept in resolving the contrary imperatives of competition and collaboration in what was termed a 'post-market' economy. This was a theme that was picked up in the third roundtable, which considered issues and implications for institutions that are *for* a place, rather than simply being *of* a place.

In between these two related roundtables, the second discussion addressed the apparent lack of consistent definition of what constitutes 'technical education'. In the essay, I argued that the lack of clear differentiation between technical education and other forms of education risked undermining the current technical education reform programme. The conversation that followed failed to reach a consensus definition, concluding that the use of the term in current policy proposals was largely cosmetic; a supposedly higher-status word – technical – was, in effect, being substituted for a lower-status word – vocational.

Each of conversations at the roundtables was illuminating, if not conclusive. They did, however, enable two worlds to come together: the academic and the practical. The academic view should be disinterested and principled, and the world of the practitioner is necessarily one of coping and compromise. Bringing them together is, however, vital if we are to survive in the short term and thrive in the longer term.

COMPETITION AND COLLABORATION IN FURTHER EDUCATION

I hope that you find the record of the roundtables helpful in stimulating your own reflections and in constructing even better questions about the future of FE and skills.

The 1992 Education Act is widely considered to represent a watershed in further education (and in higher education). The designation of colleges as incorporated bodies under the Act promised greater autonomy and the potential for a greater level of self-governance. It is also held to be a point from which further education became increasingly subject to market forces, with heightened levels of competition between colleges, independent training providers, local authority providers, schools and universities.

The period prior to 1992 is seen, alternately, as a period of stultifying control and detailed oversight of colleges by local authorities, or as a lost era in which further education operated as a rational and distinctive system. As separately argued by Keep[1] and Spours *et al*.,[2] however, the rupture in 1992 was not as dramatic, nor consistent, as might be supposed. As a possible harbinger of things to come with the present moves toward devolution, the level of control (and investment) by local authorities across the country prior to 1992 was, in fact, variable between authorities. As reflected in Bailey's history of further education in the 20th century,[3] there was also a significant level of competition between providers of FE in many parts of the country, most notably in large urban conurbations.

It could be further argued that, from the point of incorporation, the promise of autonomy was never fully realised, with control of further education simply passing from the local to

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1 Keep, E. 2018. *Scripting the Future*. FETL Monograph. Available at: https://fetl.org.uk/publications/scripting-the-future-exploring-potential-strategic-leadership-responses-to-the-marketization-of-english-fe-and-vocational-provision/

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

3 Bailey, B. 2002. Further Education. In R. Aldrich (ed). *A Century of Education.* London: Routledge.

the national level. Such a controlling tendency was most apparent in the approach taken by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in the early part of the new century.

Control by the LSC, and other government agencies, was, though, generally exercised in a more indirect way through conditions of funding and performance targets. This approach was closely bound up with the New Performance Management (NPM) initiative applied across the public sector, being most particularly associated with the New Labour government from 1997. As Keep has noted,[4] while embracing some market disciplines, NPM created what can more accurately be described as a 'quasi-market.'

The extent of central control and degree of autonomy afforded colleges has waxed and waned since 1992, and the shape of the 'quasi-market' has varied, but a constant has been the emergence of competition as the predominant mode of behaviour between further education providers. A 'compete or die' mentality has also emerged between further education providers and their 'adjacent' education sectors.

Competition was intended by policymakers to improve performance, ensure responsiveness to demand and promote the more efficient use of resources. Accentuated by exceptional pressure on funding from 2008 onwards, and a demographic trough in 16–18 year olds, the full implications of the quasi-market have, though, become increasingly apparent in the form of financial stress in most, if not all, types of further education provider.

According to market orthodoxy, such stress and subsequent failure should, in a Darwinian fashion, have led to survival of the fittest providers and to a re-alignment of the market. In the event, however, the consequences of disordered failure in the further education market in England prompted the advent of area-based reviews (ABRs), intended to stabilise colleges and to enable a pattern of provision to meet local need in a sustainable way.

The primary means of stabilisation has been through consolidation by merger among colleges, with enabling financial support from government; the intended outcome in this regard being 'fewer, larger and more resilient colleges'. Less attention has been given to the second element of ABR – creating a pattern of sustainable provision. The imbalance between the two aims of ABR – what Spours *et al* term 'Logic A' and 'Logic B'[5] – has been

4 Keep, ibid.
5 Spours, K., Hodgson, A and Smith, D. 2017. *The Area-Based Review in London: Two Logics of Reform*. Available at: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news-events/pdf/area-based-reviews-london-feb-2017

partly due to the pace at which the reviews were completed, but another key factor was the determination to maintain college autonomy through the process. In contrast to the preceding equivalent processes in Scotland and Northern Ireland[6] (and to a lesser extent in Wales), consolidation in England was a voluntary and incentivised process, rather than one that was directed in detail by government.

The ABR process in England could be seen as the antithesis of a market-led approach, but at the same time the relative autonomy of colleges has been retained. According to taste, this might be seen as 'trying to have your cake and eat it,' or a means by which the consequences of the market are attenuated, whilst still permitting a measure of autonomy and independence amongst colleges.

A further alternative view is to see the evolution of an attenuated market in further education as part of a wider move toward what might be called a 'post-market' settlement. The apprenticeship levy might also be seen in this light; it blends market-led and government-directed action, inducing employers to do what traditional free-market thinking would say they should do out of self-interest, but maintains a high level of competition among apprenticeship training providers for the business of employers. At a more macro level, the post-market descriptor could also be applied to the 2017 Industrial Strategy, much of which rests on the premise of a more interventionist role for the 'strategic state'[7][8].

In both the Industrial Strategy, and in the rhetoric of surrounding ABRs and devolution, 'post-market' thinking is further reflected in exhortations toward collaboration, as well as competition. But what are the prospects of greater collaboration between further education providers, between further education providers and other education providers, between further education providers and employers, and between further education providers and government agencies at local, regional and national levels?

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6 In Scotland and Northern Ireland the 1992 Education Act has been revoked, removing the incorporated status of FE colleges.
7 HM Government. 2017. *Industrial Strategy: Building a Britain fit for the future*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf
8 The need for intervention by the 'strategic state' may have been influenced by thinkers like Haskel and Westlake (2018) who have pointed to the challenge to market orthodoxies in the rise of intangible assets in *Capitalism without Capital*, and Mazzucato (2013) with the notion of an 'enabling state' in *The Entrepreneurial State*.

The instinct toward competition is now deeply embedded within further education. Moreover, with the continuing pressure on resources, the risk is that institutional or organisational self-preservation will remain paramount. In such circumstances, the prospect of reciprocity and enduring trust growing organically between providers seems difficult to conceive. The prospect, post-ABR, is of fewer larger colleges competing in the same way as before the review with only limited capacity to respond to local need in a differentiated, interlocking and systematic way working with independent training providers and other education providers.

There is arguably a great prospect of collaboration where providers have differentiated roles and/or products that complement one another and where competition is at the margins where there is over-supply. The 'product book' of colleges in England looks very similar, especially within congested urban settings where overlapping travel-to-learn patterns have tended to encourage lower-level generalised provision, rather than more specialist higher-level skills provision. Even away from major conurbations, the tendency of schools to look to provide often low-quality vocational education, for universities to provide foundation years and higher apprenticeships, and for colleges to deliver A-levels and top-up degrees, can be seen to inhibit collaboration. As a contrast, in Scotland, colleges do not deliver Highers (the equivalent of A-levels), nor full degrees; while in Wales, a much larger proportion of apprenticeships is delivered by independent training providers, as opposed to colleges.

Exhortations toward increased collaboration are, then, easier to make than to carry forward in a post-market system, where the prevailing competitive ethos continues to be reinforced through performance regimes, significant levels of autonomy among providers, constrained resources and strong inherited behaviours.

In considering what might be the prospects for collaboration, as well as competition, in further education the following questions could be relevant:

BEHAVIOUR

1) Behavioural economists such as Binmore[9] place much emphasis on trust as a basis for collaboration. Such trust flows from reciprocity and fairness. How can trust between FE providers best be fostered as a basis for collaboration?

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9 Binmore, K. G. 2004. Reciprocity and the social contract. *Politics Philosophy and Economics,* 3 (1), pp. 5–35.

2) How might independent training providers most effectively collaborate with colleges, local authority providers and others, beyond transactional contracting and sub-contracting arrangements?

3) What are the areas and activities most likely to foster collaboration between providers?

GOVERNANCE

1) How might interlocking and complementary provision best be created without external direction, or is this impossible to achieve without the relative autonomy of colleges being further constrained, as has been the case in Scotland and Northern Ireland?

2) How can governing bodies reconcile their fiduciary duty to 'their' institution with serving the needs of a locality when this may require foregoing opportunities in favour of another institution?

3) What might a more systemic approach to further education involve? How could responsiveness and entrepreneurial spirit be maintained in a more top-down directed system? Do we need a new post-incorporation model for colleges, as proposed by Hodgson and Spours?[10]

SYSTEM

1) What role might institutes of technology have in encouraging collaboration and the growth of higher-level specialist skills provision?

2) What is the most effective role to be played by combined authorities and other local and regional agencies in fostering collaboration between providers and in enabling complementary provision that best serves an area's needs?

3) How can competition co-exist with collaboration in further education and education more generally, as it does in other areas of the economy?

LEADERSHIP

1) How might a generation of leaders in further education be developed who are equally comfortable with competition and collaboration?

10 Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. 2015. The future for FE colleges in England: The case for a new Post-Incorporation model. In A. Hodgson (ed). *The Coming of Age of FE?* London: IOE Press.

RESPONSES AND DISCUSSION

London, 26 September 2018

Martin Doel welcomed everyone the first roundtable of a series intended to explore issues critical for the future of FE in England. There followed inputs by two speakers, responding to the essay, and then a free-flowing discussion.

The first speaker, **Ewart Keep**, pointed out that most countries or regions run a system not a market in skills provision, in which the role of private providers is clearly delineated. Examples include Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Germany, France, Finland, Sweden and New Zealand. The other leading market-led approach is Australia, where there the results have been a disaster (Wheelahan,[11] Toner,[12] *et al*.), including issues with major fraud, massive problems about quality of provision, and a significant decline in overall levels of provision by the UK FE college equivalents (TAFE institutes).

In England, FE operates in a governance environment consisting of a set of quasi-market segments, each with its own funding rules and competitive systems: 14–16; 16–18/19; levy-funded apprenticeship; non-levy apprenticeship; post-19 Adult Education Budget; post 19 loans funded. Each is highly unstable and uncertain and this makes managing a college problematic (e.g. past performance is no guarantee of success in bids).

Policymakers prefer not to use the language of markets consistently; they do not use the term 'consumer', for example, and 'exiting the market' was seen as a much more comfortable euphemism than 'bankruptcy'. There are several aspects to the 'double-think' that currently exists in the policy arena. The first is that, while the belief in markets is strong, policymakers also want to second guess them. Two examples of their 'magical thinking' were mentioned. First, the textbook model of the market versus a model circumscribed by funding a tendering process where the customer is often the state, or by New Public Management, with the need for ministers to act as micro-managers, who second guess the outcomes that the market might generate (for example, by setting a

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11 http://theconversation.com/victorian-tafe-chaos-a-lesson-in-how-not-to-reform-vocational-education-7296
12 https://nofibs.com.au/an-insider-tells-how-vic-tafe-got-rolled-and-the-damage-its-done/

3 million target). The second aspect of this 'magical thinking' is the belief that we can have the best of both worlds: there is a belief by national government that in some mysterious way you can arrive at a set of incentives that balances elements of competition with elements of local cooperation, but the nature of this balance and the design of the incentives to support it remain clouded in obscurity.

The confusion is clearly seen in the area of market regulation, which can be described as 'a mess': regulatory bodies include Ofsted, with its very high-stakes inspection regime; the Education and Skills Funding Agency; the FE Commissioner; the Quality Assurance Agency (HE in FE); the Office for Students (HE in FE); and, possibly, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. Barriers, however, are both too high (in general FE) and too low (in apprenticeships). Tensions include those between: national markets and combined authorities' desire for systems; national policy goals and what the market and consumer choice (students and employers) will deliver; the stated social inclusion mission and the role as provider of high-quality and high-status vocational education and training (VET); co-operation and competition at local levels; and the long-standing three-way tension between what employers want, what students choose, and government aspirations. FE continues to have the thankless task of mediating between these often conflicting imperatives.

In conclusion, some love markets, some don't. Research for the two FETL reports (on devolution and marketisation) suggests that FE senior managers/leaders fall into two camps. The first consists of those who thrive on wheeler-dealing and competition and who would hate any return to a more systems-based approach that might restrict their freedom (raising the question of freedom from what, and to do what). The second is made up of those who hanker after a more collaborative and stable environment.

The second speaker, **Ken Spours,** suggested that English FE is on the cusp of a balance between competition and cooperation. On the one hand, there are strong historical and institutional behavioural tendencies towards competition. On the other, a new confluence of factors points to a more collaborative scenario post-Area Based Review, with new balances between competition and collaboration, with a greater focus on relationships with employers and a strong vocational agenda.

These can be understood as two 'logics': Logic A and Logic B. Logic A, driven by a focus on economic viability, has dominated Logic B, which focuses on progression, but there is increasing support for Logic B and long-run possibilities. At the same time, remorseless pressure for coordination underpins a belief that 'bigger is better'.

The collaborative direction is now dependent on the development of sub-regional structures (SEBs) and the London Mayor's pan-London Skills Strategy. The 'wildcard' is Brexit. The possibility exists of more co-ordination, but incentives to collaborate are weak. There needs to be a link between education and immigration.

Interesting regionalization developments are taking place in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but it remains to be seen how far English FE is prepared to engage in 'home international' policy learning regarding the role of national governments. Spours' view was that English FE development will not, in the short term, be national, but local and regional. All eyes are on the sub-regional and the SEBs Skills Boards.

Spours summarised the tension between freedom from (a higher authority, incorporation) and freedom to (collaborate at a local level), concluding there is likely to remain a mix. However, new groupings change the logic and emerging local learning ecologies have potential to change the balance. Scotland, Ireland and Wales all have more coordinated frameworks. It will be interesting to see how sub-regional structures evolve; there is potential to synchronise them around major infrastructure projects, e.g. the Heathrow development.

The conclusion Spours drew was that the English system is tipping but hasn't tipped yet.

Discussion followed around questions posed by those present and in the pre-reading:

SYSTEM GOVERNANCE
Of the four UK systems, which is best?

There was no consensus on this, but agreement on the benefits and challenges of each of the different systems. The *Scottish* system is the most nationally planned and regionally organized, the one that is the most like a single system. The advantages this brings include:

- the democratically elected government decides skills priorities and works with employers and regions on outcome agreements;

- it is clear to colleges what can be funded;
- all partners can come together in the same room.

The challenges of the more 'managed' system include:

- lots of top-down steering, including for regional priorities;
- the focus of a more planned system depends upon who is in power. The current government has inclusion as a priority;
- issues of scale remain challenging in translating the system to England.

In *Wales* there is an ambitious plan to bring all post-16 under one umbrella. In *Northern Ireland,* on the other hand, in the absence of a strong central government, there are six regionalised colleges, with each leading on a certain aspect which they all then share.

How might interlocking and complementary provision best be created without external direction, or is this impossible to achieve without the relative autonomy of colleges being further constrained, as has been the case in Scotland and Northern Ireland?

What might a more systemic approach to further education involve? How could responsiveness and entrepreneurial spirit be maintained in a more top-down directed system? Do we need a new post-incorporation model for colleges, as proposed by Hodgson and Spours?[13]

Suggestions and issues for a post-market settlement included an example from *Hampshire,* which has economically-driven incentives for investment in new areas. Such examples can best be described as a 'mixed economy', neither a consistent 'system' nor a market, but with elements of each. However, it was felt that, in most markets, customers have an influence, unlike the current situation in English FE, where there is little focus on the learner.

The importance of 'place', or spatial geography, was repeatedly stressed. It was suggested that a place-based approach would enable trust-based relationships to grow, where individuals and their institutions would be willing to give up something for the greater good and move away from a 'zero sum game' approach. There was an enthusiasm for working

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13 Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. 2015. The future for FE colleges in England: The case for a new post-incorporation model. In A. Hodgson (ed) *The Coming of Age of FE?* London: IOE Press.

cross-system, where benefits for both sides could be delivered, enhancing employer engagement and strengthening employer/provider partnerships. The vision would be to co-produce for overall gain. Concerns were expressed that in England every effort on regionalisation fails because of lack of agreement on who 'owns' shared spaces like the M6 corridor between Merseyside and Greater Manchester.

A wider set of parameters was also demanded. Consensus existed that competition likened to economic value risked a neglect of social capital, which was equally important. The values-based aspect of FE was seen as critical, as well as economic outcomes. Such a values-driven approach was considered not just an ideological choice but also as pragmatic for growth.

There was also agreement that we are seeing significant economic and social changes – equating to the start of a new era. As disillusion with the market-led, NPM era grows, leading to the quest for alternative models, the challenge for the FE sector, traditionally viewed as a remedial sector, is how to become socially and economically a leader, with the power to call the moral shots. Solutions were seen to reside in the development of a new civic infrastructure, focused on citizen education for civic growth. Acknowledgement needs to be made that different problems exist in different localities, e.g. the GLA needs to address the paucity of levels 4 and 5 in London, in contrast to Scotland. Rather than imposing a centrally-led solution, each area should diagnose the nature of the problem, and how far, in that place, it is productivity or social inclusion, or level of education. The increasing interest in the level 4 & 5 'space' was welcomed, as disillusion with the historically stable 'O-level, A-level, degree' track increases, and apprenticeship models become more attractive.

COLLEGE GOVERNANCE

How can governing bodies reconcile their fiduciary duty to 'their' institution with serving the needs of a locality when this may require foregoing opportunities in favour of another institution?

Attendees reported the extent to which college governors have been alarmed by the financial imperatives, the need for them to receive adequate training and the recommendation that they should have regulatory authority.

BEHAVIOUR

How might independent training providers most effectively collaborate with colleges, local authority providers and others, beyond transactional contracting and sub-contracting arrangements?

This is a complex area. Training providers are most often not a place-based. Some have no infrastructure base, so often work with others, i.e. to deliver in colleges. Two types of sub-contracting were described: market making or offering specialist expertise for delivering training.

Behavioural economists such as Binmore[14] place much emphasis on trust as a basis for collaboration. Such trust flows from reciprocity and fairness. How can trust between FE providers best be fostered as a basis for collaboration? What are the areas and activities most likely to foster collaboration between providers?

We need clarity on the role of FE, definitions of collaboration, and a more granulated understanding of 'trust', i.e. there are different kinds, from identity-based trust built over time to contractual-based trust for a specific purpose (Cousin, 2019). It was felt that leaders induce collaboration through strategies ranging from financial incentives to building networks. Those driven by behavioural economics were deemed the most successful. One suggestion was to reincorporate to incentivise and allow FE to occupy that space. The governing body and its constitution are crucial and concern was raised that governance is currently too loose, too *laissez faire,* and that other models should be considered. Leadership preparation was also important and suggestions included to start preparing leaders pre- not in-service and to talent-spot and train up those with potential rather than relying on potential leaders to apply. A training centre to develop FE leaders would allow us to build and set values. Training would need to be more relevant than that available in business schools. It was suggested there may be a possible role for the Association of Colleges (AoC) in this regard. The role of regulation was also deemed important, with agreement that the regulation framework should include collaboration, sharing practice and resources. Finally, the question was raised about how far collaboration is institutionally or individually driven. While the latter is common, it is unstable, as collaborations end when individuals leave.

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14 Binmore, K. G. 2004 Reciprocity and the social contract,. *Politics Philosophy and Economics,* 3 (1), pp. 5–35.

SYSTEM

What role might institutes of technology have in encouraging collaboration and the growth of higher-level specialist skills provision?

There was some scepticism expressed about the role of the institutes of technology and a view that it was duplicating existing provision. Attendees were clear that, as long as there is no immediate return for partnership work, there would be little incentive to engage.

What is the most effective role to be played by combined authorities and other local and regional agencies in fostering collaboration between providers and in enabling complementary provision that best serves an area's needs?

One role is to set the conditions for collaboration. There are successful models in the sector, e.g. health services joint committee projects. Concern was expressed regarding 'enforced collaboration' or 'contrived collegiality'[15] (after Hargreaves, 1990), that is, collaboration imposed from above that, by crowding the collegial agenda with requirements about what is to be done and with whom, inhibits bottom-up professional initiative and true collaboration.

It was suggested that a solution was the clear differentiation of roles within a local area. Others questioned how far this is 'carving up the market' rather than collaboration. The relative expertise of different providers means there is a need for coordination, but it is unclear whose role this is. The skills board is a potential location. There is a need to define the problem: FE becomes the solution to differentiation of role.

Some combined authorities are beginning to integrate social inclusion and economic growth, e.g. London, Manchester. In London, the GLA is developing a strategy and system-led collaborations. However, London is not typical and locality matters. LEPs cover 60 per cent of population and discussion ensued on the model of mayoral combined authority versus the LEP. It was felt that challenges to overcome include history and scepticism. New initiatives, e.g. the institute for technology, have the potential to disrupt the ecology and lead to increases in competition. Job quality and businesses support economic growth and there are opportunities for colleges in these areas; in LEP areas there is 'less to bite on'.

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15 Andy Hargreaves. 1990. Paths of professional development: Contrived collegiality, collaborative culture, and the case of peer coaching. *Science Direct,* Volume 6, Issue 9.

Again, place was seen as important. Some local systems will emerge – some will be chaotic because the nature of the locality is important (e.g. Cambridge North and Cambridge South are different worlds). We will be a 'multispeed country' (Westlake and Haskel view).[16]

There was also agreement on the disconnect between government policy and expectation and on the need to define the problem as the 'level' of collaboration.

How can competition co-exist with collaboration in further education and education more generally, as it does in other areas of the economy?

Collaboration will increase but will be social partnership-led rather than FE-led. FE is key for social inclusion. The 'civic path' may be a solution.

LEADERSHIP
How might a generation of leaders in further education be developed who are equally comfortable with competition and collaboration?

Feelings were expressed that current FE leaders are values-led, along with concerns that new generations of middle managers are being inculcated into a different values-set, with the risk that the financial infrastructure and imperatives are eroding the moral core of leadership development. It was seen as the role of current leaders to act as role models to ensure those they develop are grounded in a strong moral core. There were also calls for a 'college for FE leaders' to offer a more relevant and values-led grounding for future leaders, perhaps under the auspices of the AoC.

Reflections
Rainer Kattel summarised five messages from the discussion.

1. **Purpose** is important. Agreement needs to be reached on who sets the purpose of and the outcomes for FE in England.

2. **Productivity** is a missing discourse. England lags behind other countries, particularly outside of London. Manchester is the next well-performing area after London but there is a massive gap. We need evidence about how far more

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16 Westlake, S. and Haskel, J. 2017. *Capitalism without Capital*

collaborative models link to productivity gains, as well as agreement on the desired outcomes.

3. **Markets** remain a contested area. Questions remain around how they are shaped; the balance between an economic or a social purpose; agreed rules for the operation of the market place; agreement on where the agency lies to make the rules on market-place operation (there is currently no clear sense of this); and an understanding of the ways in which quasi-markets need countervailing powers or levers and what these might be.

4. **Coordination**

The question remains of how to coordinate industrial policy efforts. Governance is a barrier in the FE sector.

5. **Skills**

There continues to be an emphasis on the supply side of skills. The demand side is important and should be used to influence outcomes-based agreements.

Rainer concluded that a more strategic interventionist state is likely to come.

ON BEING FOR A PLACE: ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

In the previous think piece, I reviewed the prospects for collaboration, as well as competition, between providers of further education. Within the context of what Ewart Keep has called 'quasi-markets'[17] in further education, where competition has necessarily become the predominant mode of discourse and behaviour, the prospects for collaboration might appear to be poor. Despite this, however, several emerging trends were discerned that could encourage and, in some respects, necessitate greater collaboration between FE providers and with other partners. The crucible for enhanced collaboration seemed most likely to be found in responding to place-based needs.

This think piece seeks therefore to explore the issues and implications of FE colleges and providers being *for* a place, as well as *of* a place.

Focus on place

The obvious first point to make is that most, if not all, general FE colleges would say that responsiveness to local need has been at the heart of their being since their first inception; likewise, many independent training providers, and all local authority providers, have been similarly focused. The centrality of colleges to their communities has also been recognised in successive studies, and in reports such as that by Baroness Sharp.[18] Funding requirements and national performance measures post-incorporation[19] (and the very act of incorporation) could, however, be seen to be at odds with the maintenance of focus on the local.

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17 Keep, E. 2018. *Scripting the Future*. FETL Monograph. Available at: https://fetl.org.uk/publications/scripting-the-future-exploring-potential-strategic-leadership-responses-to-the-marketization-of-english-fe-and-vocational-provision/

18 Baroness Sharp of Guildford. 2011. *A dynamic nucleus*: Colleges at the heart of local communities. The final report of the Independent Commission on Colleges in their Communities. Available at: http://www.learningandwork.org.uk.gridhosted.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/dynamic_nucleus_-_full_-final.pdf

19 FE Colleges were granted incorporated status under the 1992 Education Act and, in parallel with the former polytechnics, they were effectively removed from local authority control.

At the macro-level, there has been a resurgence in thinking about place over the past five years, picking up a thread that was arguably interrupted between the 'Total Place' thinking of the outgoing Labour government,[20] and the Cameron government's Northern Powerhouse and Midlands Engine Room initiatives in 2014. At the city region level, the creation of combined authorities and the limited devolution of spending powers from Whitehall has reinforced this direction of travel.

The theme of unevenness between places in terms of productivity and economic prosperity that were behind Northern Powerhouse, the Midlands Engine Room and devolution, was extended in the Industrial Strategy published in late 2017. The strategy, with its promotion of opportunity areas, and its emphasis on the need to reinforce technical education, represented a more interventionist approach to redressing imbalances and inequalities between places and people. Though overshadowed by the ongoing Brexit negotiations, this more interventionist approach focused on place, with education as a balancing mechanism, is significant. It is also consonant with the thinking of writers such as Westlake and Haskel,[21] Mazzucato[22] and Collier[23] who, each in their own way, has pointed to the limitations of traditional market mechanisms in responding to technological advances and growth of intangible assets, the most pertinent of which are knowledge and skills.

Place and education

Thinking and acting upon knowledge and skills in relation to place could, and should, have been at the centre of the Area Based Reviews carried out in further education between 2016 and 2016. In the event, however, as Spours et al pointed out, the focus of the reviews more on what they termed Logic A – short-term financial sustainability, than Logic B – relating educational provision to local need.[24] But, while the focus of ABRs may have

20 For an account of approaches taken by the Labour government to localism, see Hodgson A. and Spours K., 'Three versions of localism: implications for upper secondary education and lifelong learning in the UK', *Journal of Education Policy*, January 2011.
21 Westlake, S. and Haskel, J. 2017. *Capitalism without Capital*
22 Mazzucato, M. 2013. The Entrepreneurial State; ibid. 2018. *The Value of Everything*.
23 Collier, P. 2018. *The Future of Capitalism*.
24 Spours, K., Hodgson, A. and Smith, D. 2017. *The Area-Based Review in London: Two Logics of Reform*. Available at: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news-events/pdf/area-based-reviews-london-feb-2017

been limited, they did stimulate reflection on the need to meet place-based needs, and a renewed consideration of social ecosystem thinking.[25]

This renewed interest in thinking about place and education is not restricted to FE and skills. The Civic University Commission[26][27] sought to review the role that universities play in relation to the communities in which they are located.

Implications of being for a place

In its interim report, the Civic Commission recounted the history of university development, tracking the way in which, first the great metropolitan universities, and subsequently the polytechnics, moved from their origins as institutions founded to meet local need, to organisations that were now focused on international and national goals. The prevailing relationship to their localities had, in the process, become one of engagement, rather than one of accountability and responsiveness. These universities, in the context of this provocation, have become institutions that are *of* a place, rather than *for* a place.

If universities sought once again to become civic institutions, the Commission argued that first, their curricula offer should be more directly reflective of the local labour market, and further that they would open themselves up to a measure of local accountability. These suggestions are potentially problematic for most, if not all, universities in terms of an implied threat to their autonomy and to their prevailing business models. The former is highly prized (if not as pristine as some academics might suppose or wish), and the latter is concentrated on bachelor-level courses for full-time residential students recruited nationally.

The same mind-set is not present in FE, where autonomy has always been more ascribed[28] and where labour market intelligence (LMI) is routinely used to inform curriculum planning. Moreover, even at higher levels, college and FE student recruitment is highly localised,

25 Spours, K., Hodgson, A., Grainger, P. and Smith, D. 2018. A social ecosystem model: *Conceptualising and connecting working, living and learning in London's New East*. Elvet Research Briefing No 3: March 2018, Available at: https://elvetlondon.co.uk/research.php

26 UPP Foundation. 2019. Truly Civic. The final report of the Civic University Commission *Final Report*. Available at: https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Civic-University-Commission-Final-Report.pdf

27 For a helpful summary and comment, see Westwood A. 2019. Universities and government should seize this civic moment, *WonkHE*, 12 February 2019. Available at: https://wonkhe.com/blogs/universities-and-government-should-seize-this-civic-moment

28 While college autonomy is held to have increased post-incorporation, it has always been more constrained than in the case of universities, particularly given the approach taken successively by the Further Education Funding Council, Learning and Skills Council and Skills Funding Agency.

with only a relatively small number of residential places in national or regional specialist colleges. Nonetheless, it could be argued, that general further education colleges have been subject to a similar process of mimetic drift toward common models of provision, particularly at lower qualification levels. A range of factors could be behind this tendency toward the general, rather than toward meeting specific local employer need, most particularly national performance measures and risk aversion in the face of declining funding and variable student demand.

The establishment of Skills Advisory Boards in several areas, as well as the selective investment in facilities by local enterprise partnerships and combined authorities may be mechanisms that can rebalance incentives for colleges and other providers to be even more locally focused. These initiatives, though, are less comprehensive than in the other devolved nations, and Scotland in particular, where Outcome Agreements between providers (including universities) and localities are well established. Within such agreements, the curricula offer is agreed between providers and funding agencies (albeit it is difficult to see what difference this has made in universities, as opposed to colleges). In England, as illustrated in the ABR methodology, and the degree of autonomy retained by of colleges, the system has been less *dirigiste,* relying more on nudge and indirect funding incentives than top down direction.

With local authorities taking a convening role and only directly commissioning at the margins of college provision, it has been largely left to the colleges themselves to determine how best to meet local need singly and how to interact with other providers and partners to achieve synergistic[29] effect. Synergistic effect that would add up to place-making capacity is arguably easier to achieve where the number of partners is smaller with more differentiated roles.[30] It is more difficult to achieve in large urban areas and major cities, where there are a multitude of providers and complex travel to learn patterns. Nonetheless, and perhaps 'licensed' by the ABR process several attempts are being made to develop interlocking and co-operative provision that better meets local need.[31]

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29 A much used and misused word but probably correct in this context.

30 Role differentiation was a key theme in my inaugural professorial lecture, *Defining Further Education: Does it matter?* Available at: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news-events/events-pub/feb-2018/defining-further-education-does-it-matter/

31 See, for instance, the West Midlands Further Education Skills & Productivity Group, as described in KennyBirch, R. 2017. *Working Better Together: Colleges collaborating to succeed*. Localis. See also the work undertaken as a part of the East London Vocational Education Project (2018) by the Post 14 Centre for Education and Work UCL IOE. Available at: https://www.elvetlondon.co.uk/

In such cases, specialisation is being developed between colleges, offsetting risk and allowing for a joined-up approach to local investment opportunities.

This specialisation is logically enough most likely to be at levels 4 and 5, and occasionally at Level 3, where specialist staff and facilities are integral to successful delivery. At these higher levels, however, colleges are increasingly in competition with better-resourced universities, even though the provision made by those universities may be more generic and not optimised to local employer or economic need. In this respect, colleges in Scotland are better placed through a greater degree of top-down directed role differentiation, with universities seldom delivering below full bachelor's degree level and colleges delivering technical and professional education up to Level 5. Whether in a less-managed system, such role differentiation and partnering can emerge more evenly across England, remains an open question, depending, as it does, on institutions foregoing short-term self-interest in favour of longer-term shared benefit.

The counter-factual: Place as destiny

Despite these challenges and issues, there appears to be in FE colleges a common acceptance that their offer in terms of curricula and services should reflect and respond to local economic need. In her speech to the 2018 AoC Conference, HMCI Amanda Spielman indicated, however, that she felt there was more to be done in this direction when she said:

> *I'm afraid that I have to draw attention to those colleges knowingly offering courses that do not have good local employment prospects.[32]*

She then chose to illustrate her point by referring to courses in the creative arts that held little prospect of a direct route to employment locally. The Secretary of State for Education made remarks in a similar vein in a recent speech when he referred to the apparent surfeit of students studying as hairdressers. In both cases, there was strong response from sector leaders pointing to the indirect employment benefits of such courses in terms of qualities like confidence, presentability and communication skills. Moreover, the fact that colleges and others are mostly funded on a per capita basis on student numbers means that

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32 Amanda Spielman speech to AoC Conference 2018. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/govern-ment/speeches/amanda-spielman-at-the-2018-aoc-annual-conference

student demand necessarily trumps employer need. The best that providers can do in such circumstance is to move student demand closer to employer need over time.[33]

It would be strange if the curricula offer of Bridgwater College did not, in any way, reflect the needs of the nuclear industry on its doorstep, but if students there demand performing arts courses and the college can make good-quality provision, it would be at the very least imprudent for them not to do so.

A simplistic approach to matching curricula to immediate local economic and employer need may be misconceived in a further dimension. If technical and professional education is confined to courses leading to local employment, then young people not following an academic, or general educational pathway, will be limiting their career options. In this sense, 'place risks becoming destiny' for students not following the academic pathway. The potential for this to be so is, to some extent, ameliorated by the national recognition of technical and professional qualifications, but it could be accentuated by the introduction of T-levels with their requirement for extended work placements. It is difficult, for instance, to see how Boston College in Lincolnshire could offer a T-level course in engineering or manufacturing with few, if any, local employers in these fields.

In balancing this equation, it could be that the curricula offer for younger (pre-19) students should be more loosely related to local economic need than the adult offer, being more concentrated on broad education than narrow training. Likewise, the offer below Level 3 might be more general, and the offer above that level more nearly matched to the local economy. In both of these cases, though, adult educators could reasonably argue that courses to re-engage students and extend learning need to be similarly learner-led and offer a means of escape from locality.

All of this, in a pluralistic liberal economy, argues for a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be for a place. Being *for* a place means more than being for employers, or responding to economic need. FE providers will continue to need to balance interests at the local level and will need the support, co-operation and understanding of partners, in striking a balance between communitarian and individual interests.

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33 Scott Kelly touches on these issues in his HEPI blog, 'When it comes to deciding what courses should be studied, the gentleman in Whitehall really doesn't know best'. Available at: *https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/02/05/when-it-comes-to-deciding-what-subjects-should-be-studied-the-gentleman-in-whitehall-really-doesnt-know-best/*

In considering the issues and implications of being for a place, the following questions could be relevant:

AUTONOMY

1) To what degree might autonomy need to be ascribed for all institutions in order for place-based needs to be met more holistically?

2) What are the prospects of autonomous institutions 'self-synchronising' in order to meet local need more effectively?

3) Would role differentiation be helpful in better meeting local need and, if yes, how best might this be achieved?

STRUCTURES AND INCENTIVES

4) How best might Skills Advisory Panels influence the 'shape' of local skills provision?

5) What prospects are there for Outcome Agreements in England (that apply to both FE and HE as in Scotland?

6) How might national imperatives and performance measures best be reconciled with local need, not only in Combined Authorities with a devolved funding, but also in the rest (majority) of the country?

7) What would be the most effective incentives to ensure that skills ecosystems do not become elite, as in the case of Silicon Valley or TechCity, and instead provide for outcomes that are fairer and more equal?

SPECIALISATION

8) At what level(s) is specialisation most appropriate between FE providers?

9) How could potential specialisms be identified and reinforced?

PLACE AS DESTINY

10) What real prospect is there for skills and education to become place-making capabilities and to ensure that left-behind communities are no longer left-behind?

11) How do colleges and other providers best balance the demands of students with local employer and economic need?

12) Are age and/or levels instructive in striking a balance between individual and community need, i.e. does the curricula offer need to be more broadly based pre-19, than post-19?

RESPONSES AND DISCUSSION

London, 14 March 2019

Martin Doel welcomed participants to the roundtable. There followed inputs by two speakers and a free-flowing discussion.

Andy Westwood began the session by setting out the context in which the discussion was taking place. He spoke of our politics being in unchartered territory and extraordinary times, particularly given the week's activity in Parliament surrounding Brexit. The fracturing of politics and the way it is playing out is critically important to the discussion on FE as it links to much of the way we think about society, place, regions and cities.

Much of the perceived anger comes from and can be seen and felt most clearly through the lens of 'place'. Deep new rifts are tearing apart the fabric of Britain and other Western societies: thriving cities versus the provinces, the highly skilled elite versus the less educated, wealthy versus developing countries. So far, these rifts have been answered only by the revivalist ideologies of populism and socialism.

The vote to leave the European Union (EU) has reinforced the longstanding divide down regional lines with deep inequality in regions getting worse – despite being there a long time. In addition, there are equally fractures between inter-regional localities as well as regional. This requires both a political and institutional response. In places such as Grimsby, Dudley and Great Yarmouth, whether you are looking for work, in work or trying to run a business, things are difficult. Recent research shows that regional inequality is worse in the UK than anywhere else in the OECD. The public anger and frustration with our politics and economy is palpable. Is this context temporary or permanent?

In most system debates about further and higher education, there is a tendency to revert to the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and cite a number of things e.g. technical skills and polytechnics that were lost as a result of the Act. Whatever the weaknesses of local control, the introduction of that Act resulted in the loss of a sense of civic and local attachment. Alongside this, there has been a process of deep centralisation over a long period of time. As a result, all the main incentives for both FE and HE are driven nationally.

Any locally driven decisions are taken at an individual level, working against the prevailing policy trajectory.

Professor Westwood concluded by outlining that the Spending Review period has formally begun in the context of a broken politics. It is uncertain what settlements HE and FE will get in a tight economic environment – as set out by the Chancellor in his Spring Statement. The local, civic approach is likely to be very far down the list in this space and is in a poor place, both in terms of capabilities and institutionally. Devolution is incredibly important to this agenda. However capable city regions become, the bringing together of skills, industrial regions and place should be at the top of city regions and the mayors' agenda. There are deep lessons for FE and HE institutions to learn from this.

The second speaker, **Scott Kelly,** outlined that the idea of FE colleges being responsive to local skills demand would appear to make sense, but that there were dangers with this approach, as outlined in a speech by the Education Secretary on December 18.[34]

Too much focus on being local could be a barrier to social mobility, a cause of the 'residualisation' of technical education and be a rival to sectoral or national need as a driver of training provision.

Responding to local need could lower the sights of young people. It would limit opportunity and social mobility if the curricula were simply matched to the local labour market, as they would be restricted to their movements within the locality. This would reinforce the growing social distinction between FE and HE students (three- year residential degrees). And if jobs in the locality go, then what?

The expansion of higher education has pre-dominantly been in the form of three-year residential degrees at universities who offer a wide range of provision. The danger of 'residualisation' of technical education is that an increased focus on local need as a driver of technical provision could push more young people down the academic path if popular courses are shut down or limited. This is particularly risky at Level 3. BTECs have been popular because they keep young people's options open whereas T-Levels are more specific, focusing on a particular technical path. The combined impact of T-Levels and the

34 https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/damian-hinds-technical-education-speech

apprenticeship levy could limit opportunities for young people because of the workplace training requirements meaning smaller numbers. Specialisation is needed at higher levels, i.e. Level 4 and Level 5, as higher-level qualifications tend to be more transferable.

In relation to the balance between local and national, sectoral drivers. In his December speech, the Education Secretary highlighted two areas where local provision should meet local need: web-design and hairdressing. If there is too much provision e.g. hairdressing (as cited by the Education Secretary) it could be argued that this is a national problem (as there is too much provision nationally), rather than local and therefore requires a national approach.

Web design is an example of an unintended consequence of a policy that promotes local demand, as it limits the opportunity of young people who may wish to pursue this route but who live in areas without this industry. Just because these courses aren't offered locally, e.g. web design in Lincolnshire, doesn't mean they can't be available nearby.

The government wants to engage employers and give them funding but doesn't prescribe what they want. If we are to meet the potential needs of new and emerging industries in future, we need a national approach.

Discussions followed around questions posed by those present and as set out in the pre-reading:

AUTONOMY
To what degree might autonomy need to be ascribed for all institutions in order for place-based needs to be met more holistically?

What are the prospects of autonomous institutions 'self-synchronising' in order to meet local need more effectively?

The discussion around the questions on autonomy prompted a series of other issues surrounding the difficulty in identifying the particularities of being a 'place'. Meeting local need is similarly hard to define given that, despite national priorities and local enterprise partnership (LEP) skills priorities, many of the jobs on offer are pre-dominantly in warehouses, social care and low-level skills. It can therefore be challenging to reconcile place-based, local need with economic priorities.

There was general agreement that colleges respond to government direction. Institutions can be 'self-synchronising' and come together, but this approach has not been encouraged by successive governments or funding incentives and is therefore not widespread. The approach of colleges has more often tended to be a civic, community response rather than an industrial response, despite restrictive funding mechanisms and structures. Baroness Sharp's report, *A dynamic nucleus: Colleges at the heart of local communities* (2011) is still as relevant today as when it was written as an agenda for a principles driven place-based approach.

An example was given of colleges in the Midlands region coming together to develop a narrative and be one coherent voice representing the FE sector. This was primarily a response to universities dominating the skills conversations locally and having representation and voice on LEP boards and at the decision-making table.

Another example cited was that of a former industrial town with a historic lack of civic leadership which has led to high unemployment and insufficient high value jobs (the majority are all low value). A key part of the local college's role is to create high value jobs which they are seeking to do via the introduction of a new advanced construction centre. Residual technology industries make up 20 per cent of the area, so there is an urgent need to do more. This approach is about place-making as opposed to fatalistically responding to place. College autonomy allows for this, providing there is vision, clear direction and support.

A discussion then followed about co-commissioning – a model that is operating in the NHS that drew an interesting parallel with the health system and whether this could be extended in the skills sector. Essentially, allowing devolution with autonomy rather than telling people what to do. The 'push points' in the health sector that got decision makers into the mode of co-commissioning came about because of the disconnect between health and social care, the different organisations and localities that controlled it and the crisis in public health. Discussion was around how to get FE providers into a similar space without top-down intervention and direction.

Would role differentiation be helpful in better meeting local need, and, if yes, how best might this be achieved?

Role differentiation, particularly by level, could be helpful, but it was suggested that, as a country, we tend depend on immigrant labour to fill lower-level jobs. Higher education institutions will try to colonise Level 4 and Level 5 – especially if government says it is a priority. It was noted that this situation wouldn't be permitted in Scotland where universities cannot normally access the Level 4/5 market; which is the domain of FE colleges. Private training providers haven't formed much of the discussion around this issue, but they also have a role in a highly competitive, but poorly defined marketplace. It is challenging to develop a coherent system in such a marketised environment. The government is happy to leave this to the market, whereas other countries view this as ill-advised. With that in mind, is there a need for government to be more prescriptive, or to otherwise incentivise?

There was also a discussion around the need for distinguishing providers within the system, such as those with civic attachment, that would not usually include independent training providers (ITPs). This led to general agreement for developing a system of 'more trusted providers', i.e. colleges, than those simply looking to make profit, i.e. some ITPs.

STRUCTURES AND INCENTIVES
How best might Skills Advisory Panels influence the 'shape' of local skills provision?

A number of people made the point that the college offer cannot simply match that of local labour market need as you cannot force young people to make a specific choice. Colleges need to offer a broad curriculum at lower levels to cater for students with a foundation in any of the subjects they wish to pursue but should look at specialising in certain fields at a higher level, i.e. Level 4 and 5. It is difficult to identify local skills provision, particularly in areas that may have pre-dominantly low-level skills and high unemployment. The college role in navigating individual choice, labour market demands and where LEPs/Skills Advisory Panels want the local labour market to go and reconciling this with funding incentives and the reality of jobs available on the ground, is a constant challenge.

On a practical level, LEPs have no day-to-day funding so they will encounter problems producing local skills plans. The data is also out of date as it is two years behind. When data is broken down by skills and sector, it is frequently unusable. There is a risk that Skills Advisory Panels will create a plan and communicate requirements to colleges, but they

might not have money or resources to enable action. There is no carrot and no stick with this model. Scale has a consequence too, which may prevent success.

What prospects are there for Outcome Agreements in England (that apply to both FE and HE as in Scotland)?

Outcome Agreements (OAs) operate in Scotland and at their most basic level create a process of dialogue between the funding council and an individual college. OAs also apply to universities in Scotland, albeit it seems that universities are not held to account in the same detail as colleges. As part of the OA, a college has to demonstrate that it has taken onboard local labour market needs, signs of decreasing and increasing need and how the block grant will be spent. The Scottish Government has sectoral investment plans which are skills plans for each sector. Within these plans, the provider (HE or FE) has to state what they intend to do and so does the employer. This model has money and a sophisticated system and funding organisation behind it and it has an impact on employers. It is small enough to have a narrative given the small scale in Scotland.

When considering this model for England, it is worth nothing that there are only 14 colleges in Scotland and the Scottish Government knows the leaders of these institutions well. Discussion then followed as to who would conduct this in England given the number and size of colleges and whether OAs would create bureaucracy. A suggestion put forward was whether Skills Advisory Panels are England's answer to outcome agreements.

How might national imperatives and performance measures best be reconciled with local need, not only in Combined Authorities with a devolved funding, but also in the rest (majority) of the country?

What would be the most effective incentives to ensure that skills ecosystems do not become elite, as in the case of Silicon Valley or TechCity, and instead provide for outcomes that are fairer and more equal?

There is a tendency for local vs national to be seen as a see-saw, as one goes up the other comes down. After 27 years, it is startling how few people in public policy forget about the level of change that came about following the 1992 FE and HE Act.

Questions around devolution of the adult education budget prompted a series of questions: how effective can devolving the adult education budget be? Does the government only devolve things that are not important? What does devolved mean? Is it linked to fiscal measures or can it just be spent? If the gold standard is a degree (as seen by employers, young people et al), we need to align that with Level 4 skills and jobs. How do you develop a cluster of outcomes that preserves college as embedded in the community?

There is generally strong support for local decision taking re: adult education budget, but concerns were raised that it might become a creation of local bureaucracy. Local outcome agreements will result in huge problems for colleges administering them but they should be managed locally. Successive Labour and Conservative governments have failed to recognise 'place' in terms of economic development and feeling. We need a pro-active industrial strategy to support this.

It was suggested that colleges being subject to prescription (from government) alongside increased operational autonomy would be acceptable if roles and boundaries were better-defined. There is a perception that LEP intervention tends to work around economics, that LEPs are business focused not people focused. Discussion stemmed around the continual focus and emphasis on the market, whilst being 'values-based' has been lost. The market domination is top down, whereas value is community based. The challenge is to create value in a market environment.

SPECIALISATION
At what level(s) is specialisation most appropriate between FE providers?

How could potential specialisms be identified and reinforced?

Many colleges have forgotten or no longer have embedded specialisms -courses that an institution is renowned for, not necessarily courses with high volume. This is partly due to the funding not allowing for courses of high value and small volume and because of colleges wanting to offer a broad curriculum readily available across their campuses.

System and area planning does not happen unless colleges come together. The natural place to be is a collective, despite it not being the norm, it is un-natural to be disconnected. Constrained funding has driven a behaviour of factions and colleges working in silos.

Government should not prescribe this collaboration, colleges should come together and do it among themselves. One example of where this has happened successfully is in the West Midlands where colleges have come together of their own volition.

There was general agreement that colleges need to offer general provision at a lower level and specialise at a higher level i.e. Level 4 and Level 5. This way, specialisation would not restrict students to having to move further between campuses. There could be specialisation at Level 3 in some areas, but the increased focus on Level 4 and 5 could be achieved through the Augar Review and other incentive agreements. Alongside this, there is a need for more sensible regional planning.

PLACE AS DESTINY

What real prospect is there for skills and education to become place-making capabilities and to ensure that left-behind communities are no longer left-behind?

How do colleges and other providers best balance the demands of students with local employer and economic need?

The relationship between place and places is variable. What do we mean by *place?* How do you preserve attachment to particular places? These archaic terms don't relate to how the modern economy works. We have been redefining space, colleges no longer have county town names, they have been renamed according to the regional space. The idea of place has been lost. Area Based Reviews have regionalised lots of provision and the relationship a college has with the local community is discretionary, not mandatory. Governors often talk about how colleges retain links to the local community. Accountability in inspection is linked to how a college responds to locality but isn't fundamental to the way in which colleges function.

It is difficult to define place; economies are being drawn into the centre of city regions such as Sheffield and Barnsley, Wolverhampton and Birmingham. Definitions of place often refer to an urban model. Defined political areas are not always homogenous or harmonious. For example, there are tensions within the Greater Manchester region between Manchester and Salford, Bolton and Bury, Oldham and Rochdale, etc. The area is now referred to as 'a region of cities and towns'.

At a national level, certain regions are seen to have a few important sectors e.g. Greater Manchester and the West Midlands. You need to build specialism at Level 4 and Level 5 and in T-Levels to get the Industrial Strategy right.

There is some evidence of places beginning to self-direct and identify themselves for the benefit of individuals and the community. For example, Plymouth are using their geographical isolation to their advantage to define themselves as an area, Doncaster who are renowned for their rail skills are using national organisations to build locally. Humber LEP are creating a region of urban and coastal learning and provision. Greater Manchester is considering adopting a 'City of Learning' or place for learning to stimulate desire and collaboration. The best example of this place-based self-direction is Cardiff where local businesses in cyber security came together and are now at the forefront of the cyber security industry.

Are age and/or levels instructive in striking a balance between individual and community need, i.e. does the curricula offer need to be more broadly based pre-19, than post-19?

This question prompted a discussion around the market and the environment in which colleges operate. The market is made up of a series of loosely connected locations and is what colleges are drawn to and have to respond to. It is an environment in which student numbers determine college income, but colleges are challenged about meeting employer need and driving employer demand.

The market led approach works well where there is a viable marketplace e.g. London, and therefore brings volume. The problem with a market led approach is the connection (or lack of) between qualification and employment. An individual market approach doesn't lead to people having the right qualifications. People do not often make informed choices and choice is not regulated. Is age 18 the new 16? A closer association is needed with the labour market for school leavers at age 18. There was some agreement that apprenticeships should be taken from age 18.

Discussion then moved on to how to prevent competition where popular courses are run that don't link to local need. A 'licence to practice' approach was suggested. There was agreement that it must be based around employer links and businesses in terms of funding.

DEFINING TECHNICAL EDUCATION

With the successive publication of the Productivity Plan, the Sainsbury Panel Report, the Skills Plan and the Industrial Strategy, the term 'technical education' has become increasingly ubiquitous and used as an alternative to 'vocational education'. But nowhere in any of these publications is the term 'technical' directly defined.

The Sainsbury Panel Report comes closest to an inferential definition of technical education through its identification of 15 routes into skilled employment and the insistence that content of qualifications associated with the technical pathway – whether work-based or college-based – be determined primarily by the needs of the workplace and employers. The identification of the 15 routes is based upon the grouping of standard occupational codes (SOC) with four likely to be reserved for apprenticeships only.[35] The routes do not encompass all occupations:

> *Technical education must require the acquisition of both a substantial body of technical knowledge and a set of skills valued by industry. However, not all occupations require technical training in college or as part of an apprenticeship. Unskilled and very low-skilled occupations do not have sufficiently large knowledge requirements to warrant a technical education route.* Sainsbury Panel Report, p. 33

Quite aside from the tautological nature of this reasoning, with the word *technical* remaining undefined in relation to either *education* or *knowledge*, it also stretches the use of the word technical beyond its everyday use, with the inclusion of occupations like childcare and hospitality. The passage above also clearly implies that technical education sits within a hierarchy and is associated with high and not low skilled occupations. It is this juxtaposition that drives the requirement for qualifications within the college-based route (T-levels) at level 3 and that not all young people will be able access them directly at age 16. The intention behind these conditions is that T-levels be highly regarded as rigorous and stretching by employers, parents and students. Additionally, it could be inferred that

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35 Protective Services, Sales and Marketing, Social Care, and Transport and Logistics

'vocational,' in the lexicon of education and training, has become a damaged word, being associated with lower level provision for the 50 per cent who don't or can't follow the more recognised academic pathway.

The restriction of technical education to certain occupational groups, to higher achieving students and to levels at or above Level 3 is not, however, sufficiently clear a definition to inform curriculum development, pedagogy, quality assurance, or assessment methodologies. Each of these latter considerations could be critical in ensuring that the policy proposals relating to technical education have longevity in the face of widespread scepticism and the potential for self-interested stasis. Such scepticism and defensive attitudes (whatever public declarations to the contrary) are entirely understandable given the many reform false starts in this area and the frequency of changes in policy direction.[36]

- **What** is to be taught in terms of content and skills?
- **Who** should be the teachers?
- **Where** should it be taught?
- **How** should it be taught?
- **How** should it be assessed?

It is only the first of these questions that the Sainsbury Panel Report answers to any significant degree. The content of the curriculum for technical education should be drawn from the workplace, with the needs of the occupation being the pre-eminent determinant. It follows that employers should have a leading role in sanctioning the content of the curriculum. In this respect, technical education is avowedly instrumental which at the higher levels, in particular, may make it an uncomfortable fit for higher education institutions that value academic independence and autonomy. But whilst instrumental, there is a difference between technical *education* and technical *training*. Apprentices and full-time technical education students need to develop underlying skills that enable them to learn and re-interpret experience after formal instruction has been completed. The term *education* could also be taken to imply a need to develop wider competencies and knowledge particularly in the case of younger people such as citizenship, social action and

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36 See, for instance, Institute for Government. 2017. *All Change* or City and Guilds. 2014. *Three decades of going round in circles on skills policy is damaging UK PLC*.

health and well-being. Setting qualifications in such a wider context is entirely consistent with the Wolf Report on vocational qualifications, which introduced programmes of study for young people, within which qualifications are embedded; technical education must be embedded within a developmental programme of study, as well as being a discrete qualification.

In identifying what might be required of teachers of high quality technical education, the report of the Commission on Adult Vocational Education and Learning (CAVTL) (2013),[37] though prepared in relation to adults has salience for technical and vocational education at all ages. A key conclusion of the Commission was that excellent vocational education was most likely to be delivered by what they termed *dual professionals* – teachers or lecturers who were both expert in their occupational profession or trade **and** as teachers. To be credible with their students, such teachers are most likely to have been recruited from the industry and employment field toward which a technical education course is oriented. To remain credible as teachers of technical education they need also to be continually updated as the state of practice within their trade or profession in a parallel way to lecturers in academic studies who need keep themselves abreast of research.

A further condition of excellent vocational teaching identified by CAVTL was the need for a *clear line of sight* between the learning environment and the work environment. This line of sight was most likely to be engendered by what the Commission called a *two-way street* of continuous engagement between the education provider and its teachers and the industries in which students were being prepared for employment. Through this means, the curriculum could be continuously updated to meet emerging needs within the workplace. The *clear line of sight* also benefits from education and training being conducted in industry-standard facilities, or by using high quality simulators, enabling the most realistic experience for students. In completing its work, however, CAVTL made no distinction between *vocational* and *technical* education.

The ubiquity and singularity of the word 'technical' in recent policy discourse could, of course, simply be cosmetic. What is regarded as a low status word (vocational) is hence being replaced with a higher status word (technical). With possible similar nostalgic appeal to the word 'apprenticeship,' the word technical may be also be perceived as being more

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37 https://cavtl.excellencegateway.org.uk/commission-news/its-about-work.

aspirational than vocational, the latter word having become unduly associated with, 'second chance education'. If this is the case, then the current reform programme risks being built on insubstantial foundations. Without distinctive definition, the term technical must be fragile and always liable to subversion of meaning. Such subversion could, in turn, frustrate attempts to deliver the paradigm shift that government says that it is seeking.

It is in the last two 'how' questions, in relation to pedagogy and assessment, that a differentiator between vocational and technical might be found. In the case of both, a key conceptual differentiator could be the consequence of error. In technical education, the consequences of error are immediate, unforgiving and personal for other than the learner, while in academic education risk is abstract, remote and personal to the learner.

Servicing an aircraft, repairing a braking system on a car, installing an electrical ring main, applying chemicals in a hair salon or cooking a meal for 50 diners must done safely and comply with stringent quality conditions. Fundamentally, at the outset students in technical education must understand that there are right and wrong ways to do things. This does not mean that creativity and innovation have no place in technical education, but they must be based upon sound technique. This then demands that learning through discovery in technical education must be within clearly defined bounds and that an overtly didactic approach to teaching is necessary to a greater extent than in most academic study.[38]

It may too be that the relationship between theory and practice is inverted in technical education when compared to academic study, with practise necessarily preceding theory. Rather than being taught concepts and then seeking exemplification in reality, in technical education theory is most often used to interpret experience, to understand why techniques are used and how things work. As an example, learning to fly an aeroplane is first a practical experience achieved through demonstration and application of operating procedures within closely controlled conditions; an understanding of aeronautical principles is then used subsequently to extend and deepen learning, prior to the next practical experience.

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38 Vocational pedagogy is much less researched than traditional pedagogy for school-based or university-based learning but *How to Teach Vocational Education* by Lucas, Spencer and Claxton (Centre for Real Life Learning University of Winchester, 2012) explores these issues, as does *A Practical Guide to Craftsmanship* by Lucas and Spencer (Centre for Real Life Learning University of Winchester, 2014). It is also worth reflecting that the observations here apply well within the medical education, which is not generally regarded as technical education.

The aeronautical example is also instructive when considering essential differences in assessing learning between technical and academic education. It is the decision of a flying instructor that a student can safely permitted to fly solo; this is not a decision that is easily subject to external weighting and oversight.[39] The flying instructor is trusted to make the decision, but that decision-making trust is subject to periodic quality assurance by a peer simulating the behaviour of an ab-initio student. This approach is very much in keeping with the traditional approach to apprenticeships as conceived in the medieval guilds, with a master craftsman or woman[40] signing off the indenture papers of an apprentice, judging the apprentice fit to join the guild. Distinctive technical education depends upon the mastery and demonstration of practical skills, not simply upon the completion of written exams or papers. Such a requirement poses considerable challenges to systems of mass education, though use of virtual realities may provide a way forward here, albeit without the jeopardy involved in fully realistic circumstances.

Though the Sainsbury Panel Report concentrated upon Level 3, the report was clear that technical education should continue beyond that level and work is now underway in developing technical education pathways at levels 4 and 5. The arguments made above regarding definition may have even more relevance at these higher levels, where what I have called the 'gravitational pull of the academic' is particularly strong in England.[41] Without its own distinctive rigour, reflected in pedagogical approaches and assessment methodologies, there is an ever-present danger that T-levels will simply become A-levels in STEM subjects, and degree apprenticeships will become apprenticeships will become sponsored degrees awarded to students with a job. Neither of these outcomes are bad in themselves, but they would not offer the step change that government says that it seeks.

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39 Though this example may have utility when considering assessment methodologies I am conscious that learning to fly an aircraft might be considered occupational training, rather than technical education.

40 I do not know if craftswomen were members of guilds – but using the term 'craftsmen' alone felt inappropriate (perhaps I have fallen prey to undue political correctness).

41 Association of Colleges. 2014. *Breaking the Mould*.

In considering the definition of technical education, the following questions might be of relevance:

NEED

1) What consequence, if any, is there in the undefined use of the term technical in technical education?

2) What does it matter if technical education is simply a substitution term for vocational education?

DEFINITION

1) What is the relationship between the terms technical and vocational? Is it one simply one of superior and inferior status, i.e. technical for higher-level skills and vocational for lower level skills?

2) How does the term 'occupational' relate to either technical and/or vocational?

3) What further dimensions are there that might be used to differentiate technical education from vocational education?

4) What further dimensions are there that could be used to differentiate technical education from academic education, or is the distinction artificial and unhelpful?

PEDAGOGY

1) What differences might there be in teaching methodologies in technical and/or vocational education?

2) What is the relationship between theory and practice in technical education? Is it as simple as practice preceding theory in technical education?

3) What is the relationship between technique, mastery and creativity? Is the dependence on technique limited to technical education?

ASSESSMENT

1) How could or should assessment differ in technical education from other forms of education?

2) What prospects are there for developing a distinct form of rigour that applies to technical and/or vocational education, rather than this form of education being held to account against academic notions of excellence?

3) What might be learned from skills competitions in relation to rigour and assessment in technical and vocational education?

RESPONSES AND DISCUSSION

London, 24 January 2019

Martin Doel welcomed everyone the roundtable. It began with responses to the essay from **Alison Fuller**, Professor of Vocational Education and Work and Pro-Director Research and Development at the UCL Institute of Education, and **Christopher Winch**, Professor of Educational Philosophy and Policy in the School of Education, Communication and Society at King's College, London. A free-flowing discussion followed.

Alison Fuller

There are two dimensions to defining technical education for a full-time route: level and breadth.

1. **Level:** Where technical education is a route to employment in the skilled labour market, articulating downwards to pathways to semi-skilled position and upwards to jobs requiring graduate level qualifications. In this sense it is defined internationally as 'intermediate' level. In terms of qualifications, this links to levels 3, 4 and 5.

2. **Breadth:** It is important to highlight two aspects of breadth relating a) the breadth of the concept of occupation[42] to which the education and training (E and T) relates – contrasting E and T for narrowly defined job roles versus for broad based skill formation for occupational expertise that is recognised by employers/the sector across the labour market and, for example, gives access to professional registration: b) The extent to which general education, as well as technical and vocational education, includes as an integral element of the E and T pathway. Here we know that strong national technical education systems (including the 'dual system') include more general education in their upper secondary/post-secondary E and T pathways (including in apprenticeships) than has historically been the case in England.

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42 Fuller, A. and Unwin, L. 2013. *Apprenticeship and the Concept of Occupation*. The Gatsby Charitable Foundation. Available at: http://www.gatsby.org.uk/uploads/education/reports/pdf/apprenticeship-and-the-concept-of-occupation.pdf.

Challenges

1. Future proofing technical education in light of major technological change ('4th Industrial Revolution').

2. Moving beyond assessment and outcome-led approaches to focus on curriculum and pedagogy – inputs and process relating to both theory and practice.

3. Need to recognise that workplaces are an essential resource for and source of expertise for occupational/technical state formation but that workplaces differ and not all have the capacity and characteristics to provide a generative and supportive environment for learning and development. In this sense, we need to understand workplace as a learning environment and explore ways in which they can be supported to become more 'expansive'.

4. Purpose of technical education needs further clarification. What is it for? Learning for specific job roles, or (broader based) occupations. Development of occupational expertise that's recognised as providing autonomous, skilled workers and as a platform for progression for participants to rise up career (and education) ladder.

5. Employer heterogeneity, different availability of capacity suggest the need for co-production and a partnership approach with providers.

6. The term 'technical' is off-putting for some groups especially those interested in service sector and interpersonal occupations such as healthcare (see the Gatsby Report)[43], HCAS, radiography associated professionals.

Conclusion

We need a properly resourced, designed and planned intermediate TVET system, articulated vertically (down and up) with education and training and qualification pathways. It needs to be thought through in terms of its relationships to changing labour market structures, profile and opportunities.

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43 Fuller, A., Turbin, J., Unwin, L., Guile, D. and Wintrup, J. 2013. *Technician and intermediate roles in the healthcare sector*. The Gatsby Charitable Foundation.

Key concepts include:
- **Progression** (platform four progression)
- **Exchange** and use value of pathways, curricula and qualifications for the individual and employer
- **Hybridity** – theory and practice, training/skills; vocational college
- **Occupation**
- **Co-production** and capacity

No country finds this easy, so we need to develop collective, trust-based approaches that are well understood and respected. There is definitely a need for future opportunities to bring practitioners, employers, researchers, policymakers together to discuss these issues.

Chris Winch

There is one issue that needs very much to be on the table in the discussion. That is the issue of knowledge.

The kind of definition of 'technician' offered by Freidson and others, is **someone who is able to apply theoretical considerations to practice in their occupation**, is helpful, although it raises a number of questions.

1. **What is the theory?** It can't simply be specified by employers alone. They should be able to make recommendations as to what should be selected in curricula, but it is **research professionals and others deeply involved in the relevant occupations who create the relevant theory**, not employers (in the main). In this case theory is: *the set of assumptions, values, principles and systematically organised knowledge relevant to competent practice of the occupation. The selection should be made relative to the occupation, not to the needs of particular employers*.

Technical education should be closely related to the idea of an occupational, rather than an informal labour market. Technical education in this sense can encompass the traditional technical occupations, **but also others that make use of systematically organised knowledge**. If we take this idea seriously, then we should ensure that all qualifications at level 3 and above should include a significant element of relevant theory, albeit closely related to practice.

2. **Technical education should develop sound judgement as a basis for sound practice.** *Observation of practice alone cannot be sufficient to issue a guarantee of good performance into the future.*

Candidates should show evidence of how they will act in complex and unpredictable situations that may arise in the future. For this they will need to draw on, not just situational, but systematically organised knowledge relevant to the practice of the occupation. This entails that they should be able to demonstrate powers of judgement in hypothetical as well as actual situations.

Furthermore, **candidates should be able to demonstrate *post hoc* what the basis of their decision-making was.** If it was unsatisfactory, we would wish to withhold the guarantee of competence. These considerations suggest that we will need to assess their knowledge of theory outside immediate vocational situations.

3. **Any vocational education (as opposed to contingent training) worthy of the name should be technical in this sense.** If this is right, then the link between vocational and technical education is very close. On the other hand, the link between technical education and vocational training is much looser.

We should understand that someone who has undergone a vocational education has received a technical education in this sense. We are currently a long way from this in the UK, due to our heavy reliance on Level 2 qualifications, but this should be our aim.

4. There is the issue of the relationship between FE and HE and in parallel between technical and **technological education.**

The latter could be described as education which allows the possessor **to be able to analyse and even make changes to the relevant theory that are relevant to professional practice.**

However, the boundaries between technical and technological education should be firm, and **in particular one would hope that a technical education would give a successful practitioner the wherewithal to aspire to becoming a technologist further on in their career.**

We have a range of well-established relevant qualifications at the higher technical and technological level, situated at levels 4-6. Holders of Level 3 qualifications, the baseline level for 'technical' education should be able to access these higher levels. On the German model, these qualifications would normally be accessible after several years of professional experience and approximately 1,000 hours of study, leading to a senior technical qualification such as the *Meister* or *Fachwirt*. It's worth noting that these are currently badged at Level 6 in the EQF, giving them degree level equivalence, but through a non-university route.

Attention needs to be drawn to one further issue. There is evidence that some sections of the population, white working class boys in particular, tend to see science as 'not for them', as prestigious, abstract and exclusive (Yeomans, 2018). Given that some scientific knowledge at level 2 is a prerequisite for entry into technical education, serious thought needs to be given to demonstrating the relevance of a degree of scientific background to the range of possible employment opportunities that such students may aspire to.

Discussion

Definitions

The group considered what the term 'technical education' means to the student or parent. Vocation speaks to occupation; high-end professions are seen as vocations. There is a need for branding or re-branding to break down perceptions that 'technical' feels narrow, whereas 'vocational' implies a career. Technical education covers aptitude as well as broader skills beyond the school. The OECD has promoted the term and it is easier to understand in other countries where it occupies a 'space' in the system and can therefore be clarified. It was felt that, in England, the definition of the term has been fudged, possibly due to class connotations.

The concept of 'competence' was seen as useful, with the notion that learners can go up and down the levels, e.g. be one level in some competences and a different level in others. There is a need to articulate the differences at each level and the competences required. The question was raised as to whether the T-levels will have consistent features.

There is a need to accept the volume of training required, i.e. for five or six years, to become fully competent.

The notion of 'hybridity' as explained by Professor Fuller was seen as important. A balance is needed of technical skills and theory where the latter helps in developing judgements about the former. Some discussion focused on the issue of where the balance should lie and whether it may be counter-productive to apply academic concepts to Level 2 or Level 3 and whether there are vocational areas where the labels might not work. If 'technical' only represents what employers want, we might end up with too many standards not filled. It was agreed that a sufficient framework is needed to act as a guiding tool.

There was some discussion around a document produced by the Livery companies in 1957, which offered definitions and described the merits of technical knowledge. It included examples of seven-year sandwich courses. There have been several other terms proposed since 1900. Why has none of these had traction? One issue is that definitions are often tautological. Another is that programmes are not always given enough time to become established. An alternative approach is to use the term 'technical education' as differentiation.

Technical and education were seen as 'going together', offering a means of speaking to both an occupational and an academic future. The occupational routes have been more unstable than academic.

Agreeing a definition was not easy, but seen as important in helping to shape attitudes and behaviour.

The future

It was agreed that the debate should focus on educating for today and for the future. The view was expressed that learning a set of principles is important, as employers recruit for a set of meta skills which allow an employee to learn new knowledge as knowledge goes out of date quickly.

There are occupation related meta skills and knowledge but also work or life related skills which can be learned through the lens of one or more occupations and which are transferable.

Hybridity

The notion of 'hybridity' was returned to in this context. In most disciplines a lot of the technical elements of work are being automated. People need to know about those aspects, but also about project management, for example. There is a need for breadth in learning, to include wider skills such as people skills, financial management, project management, evaluation, reflection and how to learn.

International comparisons

It was felt important to draw on best practice from other countries and their approaches to employment law and unions. Scale is an issue in comparative studies but not a barrier. However, any messages from international comparisons need to be adapted for the English context.

A framework

It was felt that discussion in England has tended to fall into the trap of moving to levels and qualifications and that there should be more discussion on the nature of the learning; we narrow the debate by talking about qualifications first. Qualifications are the means of delivering under an education framework.

In the market, we have T-levels, QCF qualifications, technical qualifications and an applied general route. The only difference is the percentage of externally assessed content and whether the qualification leads to job or to university. If we are serious about definitions, we need one framework with simple to use definitions, and an overarching concept of technical education to fit qualifications into. It was suggested that such a framework now exists in apprenticeships and that there is a vertical concept of a framework in Sainsbury's levels from 3-7. Such frameworks have associations of rigour, seen as aspirational in policy. Professor Fuller warned, however, that the reaction of other groups is unpredictable, as demonstrated in the Gatsby research into health care occupations, where health 'technicians' reacted negatively to this term which they felt reduced their role from a focus on interpersonal care. Policy is likely to focus on levels 3, 4 and 5 because that is where the gap is seen, but level 2 is also important and ought to include some theory.

The 'cliff-edge' of 16 has remained a problem. A large percentage of Level 2 learners are those who can't currently progress. There is an inherent hierarchy associated with levels

and the question remains whether 'technical' will be level 4–5 – i.e. for people who have done well at 16 – and how current 'vocational' Level 2 courses will be integrated into a framework.

What is important, it was agreed, is the quality of Level 2 provision. It must be a level from which to progress. An issue with vocational Level 2 qualifications has been their 'lightweight' nature, which does not give access to the next level.

In conclusion, it was agreed there needs to be focused attention, including by policy, to levels 2 and 3 to ensure quality and ensure they offer a platform for progression. Learners and employers may be more willing to engage with this level if there is a clear line of sight to the next step.

Social perceptions

Most socially advantaged people opt for vocational courses because of the dual rather than single line of sight. If they succeed on the academic part of the programme they have access to any university courses and the considerable resources confer status.

Environment and eco system were seen as important factors. All stakeholders in an environment have a part to play and it is difficult to work out their role without clear definitions. There is a need for mentors to help learners with application judgements.

We need to look at the whole system, including the system of employment. It was suggested that England has a system which has a deeply embedded snobbery which values university and professional certification. While 50 per cent of school leavers follow that pathway, the other 50 per cent are poorly served.

How theory and practice interrelate

A characteristic of Level 3 competences is autonomy. Learners need to be able to plan, develop and lead and then to be able to apply these skills to cognate occupations. Extended projects enable the development of these skills. Similarly, project management planning skills may not be part of a curriculum, but are learned incidentally through working alongside others in work settings.

Colleges add in other aspects of education, e.g. personal financial management. Colleges used to be funded for life skills if they carried a qualification. Learners still get the breadth,

but it is not in the qualifications or certificate. Some Level 2 qualifications are the essential basis for mastery of certain competences and students can be on a Level 4 qualification alongside a Level 2.

It was suggested that the English classification of intermediate as Level 2 is setting the bar too low. In other countries, intermediate levels are positioned at Level 3 or 4. It was strongly felt that we should not be releasing Level 2 apprentices into the construction industry. The emphasis should be on creating a pipeline of people who have the skills to contribute to productivity. Apprenticeships could contribute to this. We are currently not creating the next generation of skilled technicians, partly due to the collapse in part time provision. While there have been important moves forward in defining what apprenticeships are, recruitment is failing. There are crucial issues around who will teach these levels.

It was seen as unhelpful to separate academic and technical pathways. The level of science, maths and problem solving can be the same on the two paths e.g. civil engineers. Issues include the perceived 'dumbing down' of the vocational route and disagreement about the appropriate means of assessing technical education. Some felt assessment by academic methods was not appropriate.

World Skills provides an example of clear international benchmarks, seen as rigorous, demanding a three-year training programme and with practical assessment. Apprenticeships used to be mapped onto it and this was seen as positive. It is future-proofed as the benchmark moves as technology moves on. The 'expert' is trusted to make the evaluation on the competence of the learner. However, it is highly intensive in terms of resources to directly observe and to licence someone to do this. Where people had modelled the cost of scaling world skills into a college, they found the need for overtraining was time-consuming and too expensive to deliver: the funding, support and expertise is not prevalent enough. The question was posed, therefore, of how World Skills can be used to raise the brand and the standard be adapted for colleges. Currently, many of the World Skills descriptors don't exist in the British system.

What does this need to look like for the future and how are we segmenting learners? We need to accommodate people who go back and retrain because workplaces are not fixed. A-levels and the academic route also need to reset.

'Equivalences' remain problematic. A framework of underlying principles may be the answer as they don't change as quickly. Vocational options can be a positive choice for young people, as they know their career ambition, whereas the academic route is sometimes for those not yet decided.

Time

The issue of time was seen as critical. Some countries give apprenticeships many more hours of practical training. The Crowther report described a system which was aspirational and never happened. The English bricklayer stands out among others in Europe for the limited breadth of skills. Mastery takes time and is deep rooted; it is a continuum that doesn't stop on gaining a qualification. Competence is enabled by technique that is directly taught: the question was raised whether we need more expert teaching and less discovery learning. It was agreed that being safe comes first then creativity can follow. Again, World Skills was proposed as a framework to operate within. For example, 600 marks could be placed as the UK benchmark; 900 is world standard. If we want to be world class, then we need to invest in the capital funding and have the immersive experience required. The assessment framework we are operating within should be reconsidered. For example, as in World Skills, in some professions (e.g. to graduate from the Royal Veterinary College) a learner must consistently demonstrate competence to a professional. The place of professionals to be trusted as judges in this way was generally agreed to be positive.

Summary issues

1. Qualifications. The quality of T-levels is yet to be proven and it is unclear how this will be judged. Is the assessment level basic competence? What benefits will it confer?

2. Branding. We need to take account of identity. Examples included the dental technicians who were happy with the notion of their occupation as an aesthetic occupation; and that *coding* is off-putting, but *programming* is not. This is particularly important for inclusion. Some occupations involve the wider concept of aesthetics and there is a question around which industry these technicians belong to.

3. The economy needs to play a greater role in the discussion.

4. It would be useful to clarify what makes high quality technical education distinctive.

5. We were urged not to 'lose the learners in this debate' and take account of the 40 per cent of young people who need a high-quality education. Solutions need to maintain both high quality and offer a second chance.

6. There must be a better understanding of the interaction of theory and practice and the ways they inform each other; theory serves practice rather than being an end in itself. The concept of **hybridity** was seen as useful, in bridging provision to enable further learning.

7. It is important to clarify definitions. There needs to be agreement on quality, competence and excellence and the sector needs to understand its own definition of rigour and resist others' imposed definitions.

Conclusions

The following key points can be summarised from a rich and wide-ranging discussion:

1) The relationship of levels in technical and vocational education to job, families and progression in work, and the inherent tension in the heterogeneity (and expansive nature) of the latter and the uniformity of the former.

2) The need for broad education in the light of meta-skills trends and change, as opposed to more narrow occupational preparation.

3) The interaction between theory and practice in this form of education and the consequences for pedagogy.

4) The need for distinctive and compelling measures of quality in technical education, where skills competitions might provide a model, but one that is very difficult to apply at scale.

5) The ongoing tendency to re-invent the wheel in this area, or alternatively to try and treat supposed deficits in a way that lacks persistence (perhaps because underlying conceptualisation is weak).

6) The need to learn from, but not to import lessons from other, often smaller systems, in an indiscriminate way, particularly where the economic and employment model is significantly different.