



P R O V O C A T I O N S

**AN INDEPENDENT
VOICE FOR THE SECTOR:
THE FURTHER EDUCATION 'ELDERS'**

A FETL provocation by Dame Ruth Silver

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.

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The Elders is an international organisation of public figures first brought together by Nelson Mandela in 2007 to work together 'for peace and human rights'.

It is easy to scoff at such interventions and to question the motives and good faith of those involved, and I offer no opinion on the success or otherwise of this organisation, or on the qualifications of its respective members. I am more concerned with the guiding idea, that there is a need for an independent, worldly wise stewarding body/oversight organisation made up of senior figures that represent the collective memory, knowledge and experience of a sector or tradition, and its applicability to further education and skills. It is to this notion that this 'provocation' is directed.

Often, new leaders believe they have to throw away or rewrite the rule book to succeed. There is an over-strong belief in the virtue of novelty, perhaps unsurprising in a sector so subject to ministerial whimsy, and a tendency to dismiss known, even traditional, approaches as out-moded and ill-fitted to the challenges of the day. Of course, no-one would deny that we work in a sector that changes quickly and in hard-to-anticipate ways. Nor should we be less than curious, eager even, in embracing new ideas and approaches. But the core mission of our sector remains teaching, training and learning, and the core values this mission implies are likewise unchanging. And while leaders must cope with new challenges and reshape their institutional offer to the changing needs of their students, they are also, in a very meaningful sense, the keepers of a tradition, the protectors of the values they inherit.

More than any other part of the education system, further education faces a crisis in institutional memory. Those who make decisions about the sector's future – decisions with a really profound impact on the day-to-day business of the people who work in further education and on the learners we serve – very often have only a passing acquaintance with what colleges and independent training providers do and very little understanding of the staff and students who populate our diverse and energetic sector. This ignorance of further education, its roots and tracks evident through the years, is reflected in the media and among the most senior politicians, many of whom have no experience of the sector and in all likelihood know very few people who have. And even within the sector, senior figures are too quick to dismiss ideas from the past, often for no better reason than that someone had had them before. This, to my mind, represents an ongoing and unnecessary waste of talent, wisdom and experience.

Ministers and civil servants responsible for further education often face a steep learning curve when they take office. Over the years, I have encountered many who are learning about the sector effectively from scratch. This should represent a counsel of caution. Ministers in particular need to approach their role in listening mode. Yet, all too often, they lead ill-considered, short-term reform, inimical to both the values and the long-term health of the sector they are meant to be leading. Of course, there are bodies which represent parts of the sector, rightly with vested interests, and they frequently offer strong criticism and important guidance on behalf of those they represent. But the necessity to maintain good relationships with ministers, members and funders often prevents them from acting independently or fully and uncompromisingly asserting the values of the sector. This is an important but too often overlooked problem for the sector.

There is a further issue here too, which concerns how success and failure are assessed and evaluated in the sector. I think that we need to think hard about accountability and oversight. Who, specifically, are the right people to assess a principal's performance in post? It is most clear to me that we do not always

have the right people in the right places to do this. Further education is a hugely complex sector and colleges and their sister providers are exceptionally complex organisations, and where there is complexity, understanding and comprehension are often hard to come by. Transparency is vital but we need to make sure that the people who evaluate what we do are the right people – people who know what they are looking at, understand how a college's place in a community makes it unique and thus comprehend the complex environment in which we work. And we need to have mechanisms in place to ensure this happens.

Often, leaders who have been subject to criticism can feel very isolated, exposed and misunderstood, especially when the criticism is shorn of context and amplified across social media. This is not at all to say that leaders should be exempt from criticism or that poor leadership should not be called out. It absolutely should – if it's truly the case. Rather, I want to say that criticism should be truthful, measured and informed, and that those who proffer it should have the qualifying knowledge and experience, combined with an understanding of impact. When this is not the case, people must be prepared to say so, and to ensure that individuals do not carry the full weight of what are often, very largely structural faults. There must be a space for this that is properly respected and supported by the sector and the system.

For these reasons, FETL wants to propose the creation of a new body of experienced, expert and knowledgeable figures from the broader world of further education; colleagues with authority and seniority who are capable of taking and using such authority to provide informed, independent commentary on policy, to work on solutions to wicked problems and to vouchsafe the core values of the sector: the elders. I attach particular importance here to the notion of independence. I am increasingly convinced that the sector needs a stand-alone authoritative voice that is prepared to assert the sector's professional and social values and call out policies and practices that do not live up to them, while describing clearly the ones that do. Such a group could offer genuine intellectual insight and act as guardian of our mission, acting and speaking without fear or favour.

Colleges and independent training providers do not, regrettably, operate in an environment that is conducive to thoughtful, values-driven, ethical leadership, with a strong focus on teaching and learning. Keeping such values to the fore in conditions of constant reform and high-stakes learning and accountability is not easy. But I do know that, it is important we do this, and that only the sector itself can call for and endorse this kind of guardianship.

I do not claim to have all the answers or even, as yet, a fully worked-out idea of how concretely this might be delivered or even whom the members of this new group could be, beyond the notion that they must not be the usual suspects. This short paper is intended as a provocation merely. I hope it will serve as an invitation to begin an open, inclusive debate, and that colleagues will be prepared at least to consider the idea and offer FETL their own. We look forward to hearing your thoughts.

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

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The Further Education Trust for Leadership

Website: www.fetl.org.uk

Email: enquiries@fetl.org.uk

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