



THINKING FOR A CHANGE

DAME RUTH SILVER, PRESIDENT
FURTHER EDUCATION TRUST FOR LEADERSHIP

This short publication reproduces the introduction to the Further Education Trust for Leadership's first substantial publication, *Remembered Thinking*. Written by FETL President Dame Ruth Silver, it sets out the concept of further education with which FETL works and offers a brief description of the sector as well as suggesting how FETL might support it in leading thinking about the future of FE and skills. It is reproduced here to give readers a concise, accessible account of FE and skills, of FETL's distinctive approach and of how it works with colleagues and partners, within and outwith the sector.

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Website: www.fetl.org.uk

Email: enquiries@fetl.org.uk

 [@FETforL](https://twitter.com/FETforL)

INTRODUCTION

Adaptable, resilient, diverse and, by its nature, unpredictable, further education and skills is not the easiest bit of the education system to understand or to describe. Most ministers given oversight of FE and skills are almost wholly new to it and face a steep learning curve when it comes to getting to grips with this complex and fast-changing sector. Quite often, they are still struggling to do so when they are nudged sideways into another ministerial position.

The diversity within FE and skills – diversity of outlook and perceived mission as well as practice – and the very adaptiveness for which the sector is noted, make it difficult to explain simply, without provisos or reams of footnotes. Nevertheless, that is what I attempted to do in introducing the Further Education Trust for Leadership’s first substantial publication, *Remembered Thinking*, in early 2015. I made explicit in writing the concept of further education with which we in FETL work. Since then, I have been told on more than one occasion that readers have found in it something that resonates with them. It remains an important touchstone in FETL’s evolving work and a useful reminder of where we, as a sector, sit within the wider system, as we enter the latest phase of Brexit-fuelled change. Because of this, and for ease of reference, we have agreed to requests to reproduce the introduction here, as a standalone publication.

Reading it back now, I recall FETL’s origins in the experience of sector leaders who lacked time and space in which to think and learn, to be more than simply speedy ‘doers’, important though that is. I described the sector as I had learned to understand and appreciate it: a resilient, flexible and highly adaptable sector full of bright, committed people, which has, nevertheless, been subject to far too much central control and which struggles with an overly complex system of

governance, control and accountability. Caught up in the all-too-frequent shifts in the political weather, it is little wonder sector leaders struggle to carve out time to think and learn.

The sector, I wrote, has a dual mission 'to widen participation into educational life and onwards into economic life'; a duality reflected in the dual professionalism of the people who worked in it – people who are both teachers and professional experts in the field in which they teach – and in the sector's 'two delivery clans', colleges and independent training providers. Despite this duality, I argued, the essence of the sector can be located in a simple phrase: 'loyal to the future'. It is 'the very nature of further education to change and to continuously redefine and rethink itself', understanding where it has come from, certainly, but also scanning the horizon for 'new and emergent agendas and contexts'.

Much has changed since *Remembered Thinking* was published, but the need for leaders to 'face and shape change' and 'to play a part in building the future of the sector' remains acute. As I have written elsewhere, while the likely post-Brexit skills shortage may look to some like an unprecedented opportunity for the sector, we should not assume that simply because an idea seems good or necessary it will be adopted by government and years of chronic neglect and under-investment will be turned around. At the same time, we need to get more ambitious in our thinking – there is more to FE and skills than plugging skills gaps and we need to be assertive in saying what we are about and in setting out our aspirations for the future. We must start writing our own script and that means becoming even more of a thinking, learning sector capable of driving change as well as simply adapting to it.

I hope people will re-read this short introductory text in the spirit in which it was written – as a clarification of what FE is and as a provocation to further thought and further conversations in the service of the leadership of thinking, which is what FETL is all about.

Dame Ruth Silver,
President, Further Education Trust for Leadership

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

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

time in reverse, and developing the next generation of itself. So it is in our world and thus is our mutable nature. Leading this mutability and mutuality requires a particular set of capabilities and knowledge.

This sector has a dual mission: to widen participation both into educational life and onwards into economic life. It is staffed by dual professionals – people who are, for example, both engineers and educators. That is true elsewhere, to a degree, but it is truer of further education than it is of any other sector. To add to the complexity, the sector has two delivery clans, in its FE colleges and its independent, private providers. Unsurprisingly, given this plurality, the machinery of governance, control and accountability is complex – the detail confuses politicians, who, on the whole, did not arrive via the FE route, and policymakers – but, for the most part, it works, to one degree or another, and, when it works well, it is a beautiful thing.

A simple phrase locates the sector for me: it is *loyal to the future*. The sector abounds with stories about the golden age of further education, but it's never been like that. The sector is imperfect, variable in both quality and mission. And it has never remained the same for long. Direct comparisons, therefore, are of questionable validity. It's the very nature of further education to change and to continuously redefine and rethink itself. That is not to say it is wrong to look back. Far from it. Being loyal to the future depends on understanding where we have come from and why. That is, in part, the rationale for this book. But we need too to interrogate the past, to see what use we can make of it. We also need to look elsewhere and everywhere as we move forward to new and emergent agendas and contexts. There

is little point in looking back simply to admire, misty-eyed, what went before. There are, I suspect, two kinds of folk around us: those who long for the past and those who desire a future. We, at FETL, are firmly of the latter camp.

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

Political interest in the sector remains acute and expectations of what it can deliver are higher than ever, despite diminishing resources. Yet it is still poorly comprehended. FETL itself begins with the hypothesis that the further education sector is under-understood, under-

conceptualised, under-researched and under-theorised. The joy, yes joy, of further education and its peoples is that it is so resilient, so adaptable, so fleet of foot. We are the thinking-doers of the education system. But while that is a significant strength, doing so many things, often well, makes us hard to describe or define, and that can make it difficult for the many new ministers, who generally have no experience of the sector, to understand us: we are the place of their apprenticeships in their officership of state. They know schools and universities, and they know the world of work, but they have very little idea about us. Yet they can change our purpose and give us no notice of that change; offer no development investment and still criticise us when things go wrong. There's unintended injustice in that: we have work to do. We have to do what we do better, and we can. That is the thinking behind FETL and it is the thinking which has inspired this publication. Not all providers of FE and Skills have been 'loyal to the future', not all leaders have been prepared to face and shape change or to play a part in building the future of the sector. We have not always been assertive enough. Time to change. We want to contribute to a better way of knowing and talking about what we do, to lead thinking about the sector and its place in the overall system. We must do better at talking not only to politicians, so that they see the value in what we do, support it and deploy us well, but also, and more importantly, to and for the rising generations of the sector's professionals. For that to happen we must be better able to describe ourselves and to make the clearer case for how important we are.

In further education we honour the ordinary: ordinary people, the jobs they do that ease our everyday lives and the aspirations they have. If we honour the practitioners

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

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

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

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