# CROSSING BOUNDARIES

## A review of FETL grant-funded projects and think pieces

Paul Grainger

# DAME RUTH SILVER

*President, Further Education Trust for Leadership*

———

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.

## Foreword

———

**From its inception, the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) has sought to cultivate an appetite for new, original and critical thinking; in itself, among its partners and in the sector more widely. It was set up in order to stimulate leadership of thinking in the further education (FE) and skills sector and to create a space in which sector leaders and others could develop and share their ideas.**

This report, by Paul Grainger, Co-Director and Director of Operations for the Centre for Post-14 Education and Work at University College London (UCL) Institute of Education, offers a stimulating overview and analysis of the work FETL undertook with its partners during 2016. It shows an organisation willing to look deeply within and beyond FE and skills to generate the new thinking needed in a sector which seems perennially on the cusp of change but which, now more than ever, is facing a future that is uncertain and difficult to assess.

The willingness to move between disciplines and challenge boundaries is picked up by Paul Grainger as a key theme of FETL's work over the period. He is, of course, right to identify 'crossing boundaries' as an important dimension of the numerous projects we have sponsored over the last few years. We have worked with colleagues from a range of different fields, from psychoanalysis and systems thinking to artificial intelligence and industrial development. This is important in a sector which, if we are honest, has been largely content to talk to itself, understandably perhaps given the lack of comprehension frequently encountered in the corridors of Whitehall.

Of course, it is important to listen to ideas from elsewhere. But it is just as important that we make our own contribution felt in the wider world. This, again, is addressed in Paul's report, which describes a 'skills eco-system' with porous boundaries within which leaders engage in 'collaborative stakeholder relationships' and act in the wider interest of the ecology to which their institutions belong. It is increasingly clear to me that the sector's future can only be secured through wider and more imaginative collaboration, and the appreciation that we, as a sector, have much to offer as well as much to learn.

As ever, with FETL, the aim is to continue the conversation. There is no point in having fresh ideas if they have no life beyond the page. We are in the business not just of ideas but of engaging with them. That is why, in addition to our project work and our fellowships, we also actively invite partners to work with us and create deliberative spaces in which ideas from different places can meet. This report is a useful resource for FETL's Board, offering an opportunity to think about what we want to do more of in the next few years, and what, perhaps, is of less value. But it also gives readers a chance to respond, to tell us what we should be thinking about, what we might be missing and who we should be talking to. As with all our work, we conclude with an invitation: tell us what you think.

# BACKGROUND

**In 2016 the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) awarded five grants to undertake research and analysis which would help encourage the leadership of thinking across and about the further education and skills system in the UK. For FETL, this means being able to focus beyond the immediate horizon; and to envisage the challenges to, and opportunities for, the sector of the future.**

In addition, FETL supported the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce to publish *Possibility Thinking: Reimagining the future of further education and skills*, a collection of eight think pieces on leadership in the wider FE and skills sector. Together, this research, conjecture and opinion represents a significant contribution to our understanding of the evolving nature of further education leadership.

## Framing

What emerges clearly from the grant-funded research and the RSA collection of essays is that leadership in further education (FE) is not confined by the parameters of that sector. In common with all contemporary institutions, leadership permeates the organisational boundary to interact with the wider system within which the institution finds itself. But in FE this is accentuated by the significant role of colleges in three crucial areas: meeting young people's demands for education and training; meeting employers' requirements for skills and work readiness; and meeting policymakers' aspirations for social integration. What these research and think pieces demonstrate is that the FE sector is at the cusp of that arena where education interacts with employment. This is the point at which young people and adults enhance their participation within wider civic and occupational domains. FE is central to economic policy, and often subject to the whims of its implementation.

A common theme emerges from the FETL-sponsored work of 2016. The leadership of thinking in the FE and skills sector is informed and stimulated by the most advanced leadership practice within wider civic and economic communities. Both within increasingly large organisations, and throughout moves towards devolved regional skills systems, dispersed structures of leadership are developing. Simultaneously, leadership in FE can energise and stimulate thinking about economic and civic participation, and can spearhead regeneration, particularly within those communities newly liberated by the

present shift towards devolution. The leadership of thinking implies leadership within systems, bringing creativity and energy to a new and locally fluid environments. Ruth Silver notes that FETL's use of the word 'system' is 'deliberate and considered', an approach which Martin Doel summarises as follows: 'Setting the particular and specific within the wider context, seeing patterns in the present which represent pointers to the future, and breaking out of the simple action and reaction cycles, are all essential components of successful leadership.'[1]

Below are brief descriptions of three models which help us frame our thinking about the extended role of leadership in FE.

The first, overarching model, that of a 'skills eco-system', assists the understanding of the various complex interactions in which leaders in FE have to operate.[2] Vocational teaching and learning is organised within a system, not just within a single organisation. A small change in one part of that system has impact throughout the whole, with many consequences unforeseen and unintended. The boundaries of the system are permeable, with local, regional, national and global influences and interactions. Leaders need to engage in collaborative stakeholder relationships.

The second stems from the complex nature of vocational education, or perhaps education for a vocation. This extends the notion of 'boundary crossing', that is, the ability to operate effectively in the contexts of education and work.[3] Following Engestrom,[4] this has been identified as an important aspect of vocational teaching and learning, but the concept of crossing boundaries relates to leadership also, particularly in the present state of fluidity. Leaders in further education have to understand the nature of complex learning, of vocational pedagogies, of the economic climate in which skills needs are identified, and of the micro-political and policy world which balances funding against employer needs and student demand. To be effective, this requires boundary-crossing practices.

The third model, developed from ideas generated in Harvard and MIT,[5] relates to the nature of leadership of institutions in the wider context of economic leadership in this latter phase of capitalism. Generally referred to as 'altruistic leadership', it is concerned with the wider needs of customers, and the well-being of the system, or ecology, in which the institution is located. Such leadership involves an understanding that an institution's success is more likely if it is embedded in a successful system, and is less likely in a dysfunctional system. This gives rise to a better understanding of the balance of competition and collaboration, and of the benefits to an institute that can accrue from its leaders' participation in activities that are not of immediate benefit to the institution itself.

This is represented in *Figure 1*.

## Figure 1. Models of thinking about leadership in FE
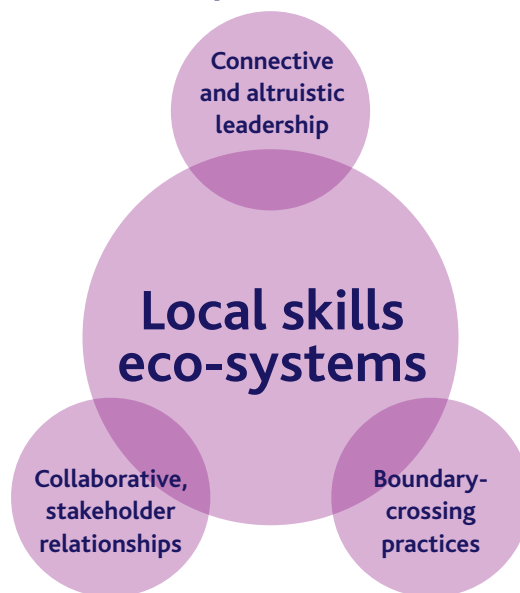


The propositions that these models support are born out in, and illustrated by, the research supported by the FETL grants. All, through their varied and diverse explorations of a research theme, explore the impact on the leadership of thinking of influences beyond the immediate institutional context, and have implications that go beyond a narrowly defined understanding of vocational education and training (VET). In each case there is an awareness of multiple boundaries and collaborative relationships.

## The grant projects

## The changing face of FE leadership in Wales: Meeting the challenges of financial austerity

### Heledd Bebb and Coleg Gwent

This project was led by Coleg Gwent, but involved, in varying degrees, all 15 colleges in Wales. It researched 'the changing face of further education leadership in Wales, in particular how FE institutions might meet the challenges of future austerity'. The report is well-researched

1    Doel, M. in *Possibility Thinking*, RSA, p. 54

2    Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. 2013. Tackling the crisis facing young people: building 'high opportunity progression eco-systems'. *Oxford Review of Education*, 39(2), pp. 2011–2028

3    Guile, D., Kersh, N. and Tiris, M. 2016. *Enhancing SET Teaching at Level 3.* Gatsby Foundation

4    Engeström, Y. 2004. New forms of learning in co-configuration work. *Journal of Workplace Learning,* 16(1/2), pp. 11–21

5    See, for example, Prime, J. and Salib, E. 2014. *The Best Leaders are Humble Leaders.* Harvard Business Review, May 12, 2014.

with a thorough review of the policy context for FE in Wales and the impact to date of the funding review.

In a wide-ranging discussion, it looks at the impact of ring-fencing in education, leaving FE as 'the neglected middle child' (p. 55) and the victim of too much top-down strategic planning (p. 87). It takes as its starting point the Humphreys Report of 2011, a review of governance of FE in Wales. The first recommendation of the report was for a small board of governors supported by series of community-facing membership bodies. Bebb notes that Coleg Gwent has four community partnerships for its campuses. Consideration is given to what the role of a governing body should be. Is it, for example, compliance with policy and system requirements; oversight of management and college processes; or to generate strategic initiatives? The research identifies a gap between the existing skills sets of governors and future skills needs. This is correctly identified as bringing an element of inertia to college strategic planning.

In an important insight, in tune with the wider thrust of the FETL grant parameters, the report also identifies the need for more 'thought leadership in emerging areas' of the sector (p. 99), and for more dispersed leadership, with staff more involved in strategic planning. They should be engaged in seeking innovative solutions and developing new skills, both commercial and pedagogical. Moreover, and significantly, principals and senior managers should engage in more networking with the wider employer and civic community, and should thereby exert more influence at a local level with key stakeholders.

The main findings of the report are organised around five key research questions:

### 1. What is the nature of the leadership role of governors and senior leaders in managing and contesting austerity at a college and national level in the longer term?

The FHE (Wales) Act had been followed by a period of 'reflection' as boards considered the opportunities of this aspect of devolution, both in their composition and in their understanding of the role. The report considers that, in general, boards are working well, but outdated structures, such as the number of sub-committees, are disincentivising the 'big hitters' on governing boards. These might be regarded as those who look beyond organisational structures to the wider system. Furthermore, boards are considered to be insufficiently robust in their selection and reappointment of governors; thus the need to be more energetic in head-hunting. Governance and management are about challenge and for this there needs to be a widening of skills sets to promote and adapt to change. In particular, the leaders and governors of colleges need commercial acumen and expertise in order to contribute fully to the local system. Recruitment beyond Wales is considered, but the

increasing divergence of the further education systems among the four nations is considered to be a barrier to this.

### 2. How do governors perceive the impact of FE austerity on communities in Wales and the implications for the FE sector going forward?

One of the outcomes of austerity is to foster a focus on internal organisational matters. There is, of necessity, an emphasis on financial stringency, cuts to the core business and a restructuring of the workforce. This can lead to a narrowing of the student profile, as safe sources of recruitment are preferred to speculative and innovative ones, with a consequent impact on social inclusion. To remain significant players within the education and training system there is a need for colleges to reduce reliance on Welsh Government funding.

### 3. How effective are the mechanisms utilised by college management and governors in generating efficiencies and generating and fostering a culture of enterprise and innovation?

Strategic leaders should not impose potential solutions but, through a dispersed leadership approach, be looking for innovations from the work-force with their links into wider economic and social contexts. This will involve not only a process of improved communications internally, but also, importantly, recruiting staff and managers from outside the sector who are engaged within local economic systems. Organisational inertia and inflexibility can be avoided in the short term by the use of subsidiary companies. Interactions with the wider community can be extended by making increased use of e-learning and blended learning strategies.

### 4. What strategies are used by college leaders to enhance their influence more widely at a local and national level?

The research also identifies the need for thought leadership both to tackle poverty and to promote economic development. However, there remain problems of complexity, with college decision-makers lacking experience outside of organisational parameters, or of participating in these broad social contexts. The lobbying of schools and HE is advocated, together with a plea to engage more effectively with local stakeholders. This could stimulate a process of crossing boundaries and extending participation in the wider education and training system. It was noted that, at a Welsh national level, tackling poverty and supporting economic development are priorities, but the links to FE as a major factor in both these areas have not yet been established.

### 5. What longer-term strategies are college leaders developing to address the funding gap and increase non-government funded income?

Recommendations include increasing commercial skills development, challenging private providers for this segment of the

market, market entry through purchasing training providers, more flexibility in terms of delivery, and generating non-Welsh markets. There is also a potential for more sixth-form provision, and growth in HE activity, but this is subject to the risk of future regulation. Among colleges in Wales there are perceived differences in attitude, particularly attitude to risk, between large providers and small, rural or tertiary providers.

On the whole, these marketing strategies are highly assertive in the devolved Welsh context, and there is a concern that they may rebound if not led in a systemic and, across Wales, in a unified way. The growth in higher education, for example, could be represented as growing the whole market, rather than competing for students. The advocacy of specialisation to avoid duplication represents a more collaborative approach. In effect, the report suggests collaboration to support more aggressive marketing.

Overall, the piece concludes that FE in Wales has been adaptable in the face of austerity, but that this has been uneven across institutions. The broad aims of the sector, social inclusion and support for economic activity, have been adhered to, but a visionary approach to the role of the sector has been limited to a few institutions. Others may be characterised as having uncertainty as to their role, accompanied by complacency about the governance of these institutions. There is a need for the sector to change its culture, to move towards a more business-orientated model of operation, and to review board membership in order to improve corporate governance. The response to austerity has to be about flexibility and rapid change and what are described in the report as 'strategic implants', the introduction into management and governance of key people with wider experience and horizons. The need to respond effectively to local communities is stressed and, in the context of devolution from the national to the local, local collaboration to challenge government policy more effectively.

The report concludes with 13 recommendations, some specific and managerial, such as shared services or economies of scale, and others regionally focused, such as arrangements for recruiting and training governors and senior managers from outside of Wales. The recommendations essentially fall into two groups: those on how to improve the performance of governors and senior managers, through reviewing board membership, leaner structures, skills audit and broadening the range of experience of those recruited to boards and senior management; and those intended to improve change management, exploring new markets, roles and collaborations for the sector. There is consideration of a specifically Welsh perspective on the distinction between governance and management. The first set of recommendations constitute standard good practice, confronting the tendency of all organisations to become parochial, inward-looking and bound by tradition over time. The second cluster is far more strategic. Importantly, the report calls for a new national narrative on skills and social inclusion together with clear strategic

aims, relating to local circumstances. It advocates a new 'voice' founded on research, different delivery methods and, crucially, different paradigms of organisation.

Much of the thrust of this report concerns the process of local devolution. It is about FE leadership, in Wales as a whole, but then, importantly, at the local level. The report is moving towards an examination of the participation and interaction of FE in local devolved systems, and calls for more engagement with, and leadership of, such local systems. As such, the report is about the nature of the FE sector in Wales. It is not simply about the well-being or survival of individual institutions, which are frequently charged in the report with having limited horizons and being beset by inertia, but about the whole management of upper secondary education and transitions into work. The core values of the sector are said to be to promote social inclusion, and support the economy: values which are for the general good of the wider system, and which go far beyond organisational self-interest. The report thus looks at the interconnected roles of governors, managers and staff, of the skills required in both commercial and pedagogic contexts, and in serving markets which meet the needs of learners and employers, and, in effect, calls for the leaders of the sector to cross more boundaries.

## New Blood: The thinking and approaches of new leaders in the FE and skills market

———

### Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), 157 Group and Jean Kelly

This report considers the impact of an emerging trend towards recruiting leaders from outside the FE and skills sector, and the impact that this has, both on the individual, and on the organisation into which they are recruited. It presents five case studies to illustrate the advantages and potential pitfalls of such appointments.

The introduction by Ruth Silver sets the context: 'Further education and skills is a challenging area in which to lead. Change and adaptation are part of our DNA. Policy turbulence is a constant and we have become experts in responding to it.'

Further education, the report asserts, is constantly having to adapt to changes brought on by external circumstances. However, this continuous reactive adaptation by the sector can stand in the way of us recognising and interpreting the drivers of that change and responding to these deeper political, economic and social forces. As, through the impact of a more open market, colleges have become more commercial, they have sought to import leadership expertise through recruiting from outside of the immediate sector. As Silver states, 'Learning from others is perhaps the leading theme of the

paper'. This process can create a tension around resistance to new ideas, together with a sense that homegrown leaders understand the sector better. Silver, in her introduction, argues for more thinking about recruitment, about what it is that we want to learn from others. As the executive summary states, 'Getting corporations and boards to think more broadly about leadership recruitment and to adjust their approaches accordingly seems like a high priority'.

The research examines in depth five examples of recent recruitment to senior posts from outside the sector. The researchers were interested in the extent to which people coming into the sector brought fresh ways of thinking, and how new perspectives could influence the thinking of an organisation more generally. The research looked at how the new recruits evolved their own thinking during the first year of the appointment, what thinking was transferred from past experience, and what innovations might result from the appointment. The rapid change to FE since the 2008 financial crash has led to the view that new ideas and different ways of doing things are required in order to respond effectively. Newcomers, potentially, can help to challenge and refresh the thinking of existing leaders while learning from their history and experiences. Participants particularly valued the opportunity to discuss issues and ideas with those who worked in different but related areas.

At a time of rapid change, leadership teams and boards are having to think about what direction their organisation is taking, and how to further engage with the wider community; as one participant said, 'to identify alternative ways of working'. This is a complex process: a balance between new ideas from outside and a process of cultural assimilation. A similar study from UCL IOE[6] concluded that understanding the culture of an organisation was crucial to a leader's success in a new environment. In support of this conclusion, the AELP study found that leaders from outside the sector stressed the importance of clear articulation of their new role, and of an appropriate, two-way, induction process. However, it is also important that those leaders recruited from outside the sector retain their more independent perspective for as long as possible in order to continue to ask searching questions and to challenge the status quo.

A further dimension of the project involved the sharing of the experience and thinking of new leaders with established leaders within the sector in order to stimulate greater thought and new approaches to leadership.

The IoE report considered whether leadership in the FE sector is really much different to leadership in most other settings; concluding that it is not in terms of fundamentals although there may be differences in emphasis. There does appear to be an increased focus, in FE, on thinking about leadership as distinct from the 'doing' elements. The effect of investigating leadership styles in other sectors encouraged thinking about leadership and, in turn, about how leadership could encourage thinking.

In certain roles, such as finance, human resources and IT, the technical skills were similar to those required in previous employment. Other roles required more complex assimilation. The views of participants in this study were that fitting in too well to the new organisation meant the loss of a necessary sense of distance, while being unable to accommodate led to difficulties in teamwork and developing working relationships.

Mark Oldfield moved from Serco to be Director of Justice at the Manchester College. He was concerned at 'long, drawn-out decision making' and set about doing things differently. His role has now been expanded to business development where he has been able to draw upon his previous experience. In other cases, the rationale was to help the organisation to get closer to employers as customers, and in doing so to introduce new approaches. Paul Taylor, Director of HR at the Manchester College, was recruited from Electricity North West Ltd. He felt that the FE sector 'had closed its eyes to what is happening with leadership development in the private sector'. The college now seeks to bring together strong leaders from both within, and outside the sector. This blended approach has characterised the recruitment of team leaders who are almost polarised in terms of their experience and flexibility. The report holds that in FE, the status quo is no longer an option; a premise which is axiomatic to the area-based review process.

The report demonstrates that being able to avoid getting sucked into the 'doing' aspect of a job, so as to have time to think, or to enable others to think, is essential. It is also important for everyone to understand that being new has a shelf life. Leicester College recruited 'Skip' from the Australian civil service. He has been given the autonomy to take risks. Putting trust in a new leader to try out new ideas and take risks sets an organization apart in its leadership of thinking. The college has become more open to doing things differently.

Ian Hanman joined the Workers' Educational Association from a career in the commercial and charitable sectors. His background helped the Association balance the needs of learners with commercial and fiscal awareness. This fed in to a process of cultural change across the whole organisation as it adopted a more risk-taking attitude.

However, many new leaders felt the need for greater delegation of authority and responsibility for decision-making; particularly those who had come from the private sector. The report stresses that the capacity for radical and original thought certainly is not confined to newcomers. Perhaps the most significant aspect of these appointments is the willingness to ask questions and challenge how things are done. Leaders from other sectors bring a perspective from a different cultural ethos. This may mean a more commercial edge or have what the study refers to as 'end-to-end process implications'.

6    Greany, T. 2014. *Leading in volatile times: Learning from leadership beyond the education and training sector'*. London, UCL Institute of Education.

Of the 21 appointees initially interviewed for the study, four had left within a year of the study commencing. Given the turnover in leaders within FE this does not seem a high figure. The report concludes with an interesting question: if the appointment does not work out, how much stems from the attitudes of the new appointee, and how much from a leadership which turned out not to be so radical in its views as it supposed?

# New models of leadership thinking through innovative governance in the FE sector

———

**EMFEC and Nottingham Trent University**

This study looks at the kind of governance required to secure the continued success of the sector and considers both the sharing of ideas to develop new ways of working and doing things differently to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of governance. It has a focus on opportunity and risk. Four innovative governance themes emerged from the research: opportunity and risk; the purpose of FE; social justice; and local/national/international economy. The study used the findings of 25 in-depth interviews, nine focus groups, five participant observers, an online survey, consultation with stakeholders and a literature review to generate a matrix structure to represent findings (*see Figure 2*).

In setting out to provide examples of direction-setting and strategic leadership, the study looks at: doing things differently to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of governance; providing direction; control and support; and the provision of fresh ideas concerning strategy.

There are insightful quotes throughout.

*Governors are supported in finding new and different ways to deliver first-class educational and vocational opportunities against a rip tide of economic, political and demographic changes.*

The concept of innovative governance – the range of tasks, responsibilities and level of commitment encountered by present-day governors – was summarised by one contributor:

*Where governance keeps a college solvent, builds reserves, maintains high-quality provision, is responsive to all their communities, maintains active commitment to equality and diversity, holds executive to account, supports executive and student voice actively, works with other corporations to improve governance through peer review.*

The first section of the report considers the notion of innovative governance. Of those questioned by far the majority saw innovation as the province of governors, rather than just senior management. Among the governors interviewed there was a weight of opinion that governors are the ones to look outwards:

*Governing bodies need to look out as well as inwards to the college. The best governors do it to bring connectivity with other spheres that are helpful for the thriving of the organization.* (Michael, governor)

*The private sector can be characterised as managing risk in order to take risk, and old style public sector characterised as having a focus on managing risk in order to avoid risk.*

# Figure 2. Matrix structure

———

|  | Opportunity and risk | The purpose of FE | Social justice | Local/national/international economy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **What is innovative governance?** |  |  |  |  |
| **Benefitting from innovative governance** |  |  |  |  |
| **Utilising innovative governance: effective transition and change** |  |  |  |  |
| **Aspects of innovative governance: specific propositions** |  |  |  |  |

Anne commented that:

*We should share experiences beyond the boundaries of the college. But in my college, governors only look inwards to our college, not strategically beyond.*

One aspect that the report focuses in on is the role of governors in promoting collaboration. Beyond opportunities such as sharing effective practice and resources, as well as possible unities, there is the more strategic voice:

*We should share experiences beyond the boundaries of the college.*

Some consideration is given to the composition of the board, and the skills shared around it. College boards include governors who are from the commercial world, who understand and have run large commercial organisations. This leads at times to frustration, with some governors suggesting that a compliance culture means that a governor's job becomes simply checking what has happened. For example, one governor, Sara, asserted that 'management runs the business, the role of the board is to ensure that it is well run and going in the right direction'. This can lead to a very limited view of governance as indicated by Phillip, a governor who participated in a focus group. He remarked: 'The executive should focus upon running the business – making the college successful, and not be distracted by worrying about what might happen. They shouldn't be distracted from the college's main business, which is education'. Richard gave an example of the value of this policy in practice, saying that when recruiting new people to the board it was 'based on skills and recommendations from a range of local networks such as the chamber of commerce, local government and the voluntary sector'.

This, of course, begs the question of how widely the term 'education' can be interpreted. Fortunately, in a section on the purpose of further education, many FE governors state that they view the primary purpose of their institution as bringing about change that will benefit key stakeholders, including learners, the local community and business. To these ends, corporations need diversity and divergent thinkers as part of leading innovative colleges, and valuing and drawing on this pool of talent is essential. While much of what is said in this section relates to making more efficient use of governors' time and expertise, some of the governors quoted can see beyond this, to the realm of leadership of thinking: 'it is about going back to sort of basics in what is the purpose of the organisation you are responsible for, which must come before strategy, because strategy really is a tool isn't it; it's a tool to do something' (Claire).

There is some discussion of the increasing scale of FE, and the impact this has on governance, and indeed on the nature of those who choose to become governors. The report concludes that due to the skills set and networking possibilities that governors bring to the board, they are ideally placed to make a valuable contribution to a college's economic position. For instance, Peter comments that the board he chairs includes 'a head of economic development of the local authority' and 'a leader of a global engineering company in our area'. He went on to say 'I do think it is important to have the particular perspectives of SME and a large national/multinational company as they bring questions of scale, cultures and systems in very thoughtful ways'.

The main conclusion, running across the four themes of the study, is that what governors bring most strongly to the sector is their experience from outside. As the summary states:

*Being open to new ideas is the first step in the innovation process.*

# Leadership and ethics in further education

### University of Hull

Ruth Silver is clear in her foreword, ethical leadership is not 'fixed, immutable and uncontested'. This study listened carefully to leaders struggling to 'do the right thing', analysed leaders' motives, and interpreted them in a rigorous manner. There are two reports. Each has been built around five case studies, using a variety of research approaches (e.g. focus groups, interviews, etc.). The first study places more emphasis on practical approaches; the second, developing the model proposed by Lightfoot,[7] sets out to analyse and portray a leadership style. In both, the researchers set out to explore approaches to leadership that embody both ethical authority and practical utility.

The approach taken by the authors is highly scholarly, with frequent references and citations. They draw from Bauman:[8]

*First of all, society is being transformed by the passage from the 'solid' to 'liquid' phase of modernity, in which all social forms melt faster than new ones can be cast. They are not given enough time to solidify, and cannot serve as the frame of reference for human actions and long-term life-strategies because their allegedly short life-expectation undermines efforts to develop a strategy that would require the consistent fulfilment of a 'life-project'.*

They draw also on Heidegger: [9]

*…to be among and in the midst of things, or to be at the center of a thing and stay with it.*

7    Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. 2005. *Reflections on Portraiture: A Dialogue Between Art and Science*. Sage (http://qix.sagepub.com/content/11/1/3).

8    Bauman, Z. 2005. *Liquid Life*. New Jersey, Wiley.

9    Heidegger, M. 1992. *The Concept of Time*. New Jersey, Wiley.

This sets a contemplative, philosophical tone from the outset.

Ethical leadership is seen in the context of the two broad challenges facing FE:

> *The instability of the sector that is subject to constant policy change surrounding the inspection regime, other accountability requirements, effective curriculum, area based review of the number and scope of post-16 institutions, and the institutional arrangements surrounding colleges' funding.*

and

> *A specific policy of austerity, leading to dramatic funding cuts that question the long-term existence of state-funded post-16 education. This has dramatic repercussions for every aspect of college life from personal feelings of anxiety to provision that is so sparse its fitness for purpose has to be questioned.*

Few would argue with the assertion that the necessity for ethical engagement is inescapable. In support of this the authors refer to Lipsky's[10] 'Street Level Bureaucrats', which, although perhaps not the most friendly of terms, describes the translation of organisational aims to local practice. Another metaphor for the transmission from institutional policy to practice is taken from Dejours and Deranty[11] who discuss the space between the task and the activity: 'It is this space that means college leaders are unavoidably required to make ethical choices; it is the liquidity of modernity that means those choices cannot be scripted'. This is an early acknowledgement in the report that ethics are hard to pin down, fluid, and, therefore, by inference, a term vulnerable to annexation by those whose motives are more questionable. The authors suggest 'there is little generative understanding to be gained from separating thinking and action,' quoting Smythe and Norton,[12] 'Thinking and acting together are a way of being'. It is not clear that this is borne out in the subsequent interviews with college leaders where some claim ethical justification for pretty draconian decisions. However, we are referred to Banks'[13] four-part lens:

- *Character – what qualities are regarded as good and bad?*

- *Relationships – what responsibilities are attach to relationships?*

- *Conduct – what actions are regarded as right and wrong?*

- *The good society – in what kind of society do we want to live?*

The authors explore the notion of ethical leadership through a series of metaphors taken from outside the sector. This too is a way of crossing boundaries. The Fosbury Flop (Fosbury, an athlete, developed the backward flip in the high jump) is used to explore curriculum innovation in one college, where students from different disciplines are brought together for mutual benefit, for example 'brickies' undertaking stretching exercises together with sports scientists, thus reducing the risk of back injury. This innovative form of crossing boundaries is linked by the authors to an ethical style of distributed management. FE is described as a 'high-risk environment'. With echoes of 'altruistic' leadership, some of the management practices described appear to go against immediate institutional self-interest (such as offering unfunded provision, accepting students who will have a detrimental impact on performance data) and are seen as ethical. Altruistic leadership includes forgoing immediate profit in pursuit of long-term sustainability. However, the authors also refer to an 'ethical glaze', or false claims of altruism, for example making staff redundant to 'remove fat from the organisation'. This demonstrates that it can at times be unclear where the ethical compass is located, and who may be the beneficiaries. 'Underpinning accountability to students' is offered as the ultimate ethic, but the link between that and necessary managerial decisions is unclear.

Another metaphor revolves around the question 'What would Obama do?' as offered by one of the leaders interviewed. The discussion moves to the absence of a democratic voice, although without dwelling on, or exploring, the issue of the requirement of a public institution to be run prudently within a context of democratic accountability, but without, itself, being run on democratic lines. The report describes one group of leaders deciding to take their institution out of FE and into the HE sector. This certainly demonstrates leadership: but, again, the locus of an ethical dimension is hard to discern.

Another source of ethical justification is offered: 'A sense of what FE is for'. Reference is made to the government's insistence on the provision of skills, without acknowledging the dual mandate which has been central to recent policy statements on the future of FE. The metaphor here is 'If you can think of a better hole, go to it,' describing a college which had turned itself around, financially and in inspection grade, through necessary cuts: 'The more cuts they make, the more partnership working the college does'. This has all the appearance of sound strategic management rather than being an ethically driven policy.

On page 20 there is a highly questionable statement: 'College leaders are not interested in trying to do regional or even national work'. The experience of the last few years throws up many examples of leaders whose approach has been completely contrary to this. In fact, the

10   Lipsky, M. 1969. *Toward a Theory of Street-Level Bureaucracy.* IRP Discussion Papers No. 48-69, p. 45.

11   Dejours, C. and Deranty, J. 2010. *The Centrality of Work.* London, Equinox

12   Smythe, E. and Norton, A. 2011. Leadership: Wisdom in Action. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology,* II (1),

13   Banks, S. 2012. *Ethics and Values in Social Work.* Palgrave Macmillan

converse may be true. A passage is devoted to a college running non-viable courses for the sake of the local community:

*We are very much of our place, and I think that sense of place is important, and probably impacts on our values and our ethics and our decision making and our leadership. It's certainly informed by sense of place. I sometimes say, any family within 5 to 10 miles of here, will have had a member of the family at this college at some point. So you're kind of ingrained in people's families.*

This does not preclude a national role in tandem with a local one. This section goes on to describe how the principal has become a civic leader. The local borough council and local industry ensure he always has a seat at the table. This could open up an interesting discussion of ethics from which stand-point? There are those who might argue that the central purpose of an FE college may be undermined by overly distracting lobbying from local interest groups. Is this system leadership, or locally driven inertia? The section continues:

*'…very angry about local politicians …they don't see broken society, and we deal with it all the time in FE'. Surely it's important to make clear that further education is not itself civic society, but has an important role within it. Defiance of democratically expressed political will is not part of that role: this is dangerous ground for a consideration of ethics: 'the stuff governments, civil servants and politicians don't see'. 'International research, economic and industrial policy is fine, but you need to scratch the surface and look at what's underneath'. Is this not moving beyond the remit of a leader in FE. Is this an ethical thing to do?*

After a consideration of the area review process, there is speculation about the state of FE that will emerge: 'The college has done well to keep going throughout the merger; they have not lost sight of their duty to develop wellbeing, character and resilience in students and staff'. The argument here returns to the Fosbury Flop, at the same time introducing the metaphor of an eco-system, in this case internal to the organisation:

*How do you make a really good college into one that's even better? Good to great and even better? It's the ripple effect. It's about interdependencies. I'm looking at this as an eco-system and nobody works in silos, they all work together as a community within a habitat and that habitat is the college. And when a community works really well it's because everybody understands their place and fits in. You don't have silos and it's hard. But when you break that down, boy does it make a difference about taking a college to the next level.* (College leader 7F)

This certainly describes an effective management strategy, yet the context in which it is presented appears wary of management:

'What a difference it makes to a senior management team when they all "get it".' The locus of ethics in this is unclear: 'Teaching and learning are the college's core activities, not balancing the books.' This again calls into question the role of the leaders of public institutions. The wealthy may dissipate their personal riches as it pleases them; but this, surely, is not an ethical act on the part of the leaders and custodians of a public institution.

Fortunately, Leader 8b introduces some balance here: 'The leadership style is that we can challenge and debate, but we will do it with integrity' and later, 'strong leadership is about being prepared to listen, being prepared to be challenged by staff.'

The discussion that follows concerns management changes in the face of austerity:

*Interviewer: Who do you see as your community? Most FE colleges tend to be linked with their – immediately local – community. But, as an arts college, you have a national profile and international people on your management.*

*College: Our community is local, regional, national and international. Intergalactic, I would say. It is on different levels, isn't it? It's a layered cake of different sorts of relationships.*

Returning to the Obama metaphor, 'the college has a strategic plan that all staff are signed up for'; 'College leaders have a clear statement of their vision, purpose, ethos and values.'

Here, perhaps, is the nub. Ethical leadership is not about standing in the way of political will, and being unwise in the allocation of money, it is more about building a strong institution within the context that the institution finds itself, in order to deliver as much of its mission as is possible. This can be local, regional and national. As the report concludes: 'Amid this complexity leaders have a distinct sense of what's important: the vision or ethos that drives their core business is their sense of purpose.'

## How can psychoanalysis and systems theory contribute to the leadership of thinking in the UK FE and skills sector?

———

**Gabriella Braun and David Armstrong, Working Well**

This is a fascinating report, structured around a series of nine seminars, written up as 'think pieces'; most with off-the-wall titles taken from the realm of psychology. Psychological theories become a resource to guide fascinating vignettes of further education leadership. However, the seminars have clearly been highly disciplined, yielding insight as to the inner drivers of those involved in the leadership of thinking. Crossing the boundary into psychology enables a rich discussion of the leadership of thinking.

The psychology is explored confidently. Some of the descriptions of further education are harder to recognise. There are occasionally references to a type of FE that has, hopefully, largely disappeared, populated by autocratic principals and discontented staffrooms.

In the introduction the authors state:

> A word about why are we focusing on the leadership of 'thinking' as opposed to the leadership of 'doing'. This is FETL's focus and it is also the backbone of what we do at Working Well. While leading 'doing' is of course important, it inevitably means acting within existing paradigms rather than questioning, reshaping or creating new ones. We believe the leadership of 'doing' is therefore insufficient on its own in today's constantly changing and unstable environment… Leading thinking focuses on developing and sustaining the capacity for thoughtfulness and reflective practice.

## 1.    Using systems theory in leadership

There has been a great deal of interest in regional systems, eco-systems and so forth; systems being perceived as participants within an economic region. However, the use of 'systems' here relates to the interlocking elements within an institution:

> Systems theory also brings into focus the core issues of organisational design, structures, purpose, authority, roles, tasks and boundaries. This includes the formal and informal, known and unconscious aspects of all these elements. Such dialogue is critical to flexible, changing organisations, and to ensuring staff continue to feel connected, understand their place in the whole, and have a deep sense of, and commitment to, their roles.

Nevertheless, the seminar touches on the role and identity of FE within the wider educational and economic context. In reference to Hamlet's personal angst, the seminar discusses the nature of identity, as to whether FE was a sector at all and, as such, whether it would always constitute the poor neighbour.

> In terms of process and content the name 'FE and Skills' is artificial: the Skills part of the sector involves further education and Further Education involves skills. We wonder whether the name implies the deeply held split in the UK between skills and education. A split that is to do with class. A split that narrows the meaning of both terms. So the question, to be or not to be a sector, seems to us to be both about complex questions of identity and also about political power and position within the overall UK education sector

Here the psychoanalysis kicks in, the notion of a primary task, and the risks associated with not choosing an achievable primary task.

> Perhaps the issue is less about answering the questions about what the sector is, or if it is a sector, and more about posing them as a

starting point for exploration of the meaning of the FE and Skills sector as it evolves. And recognising in the exploration that the meaning or meanings may need to be made as much as found. Such meanings will help to give shape to generativity in the sector. We wonder however, if the sector is still wedded to an identity as the under-dog and if so whether this will constrain attempts to reconceive it differently.

This conclusion generates the report's first major implication for the leadership of thinking. A consideration of how far the sector's self-image characterises the behaviour of the sector. This leads in to a consideration of anxiety. Do leaders transmit this through an organisation? Does this impact on, or even negate, the leadership of thinking?

> One of the first things to go in the face of high anxiety is the capacity for thinking. So the leadership of thinking is dependent on the ability to contain anxiety on one's own and others' behalf, to recognise and address the impact of anxiety and to try to keep thinking. It demands that leaders hold onto to a certain state of mind – one that tolerates not knowing, uncertainty and the vulnerability of this.

So this is binary, or integrated, thinking. FE, like Hamlet, is having an identity crisis!

> The duality at all levels in the sector produces an inbuilt tendency towards binary thinking. If this is recognised, it can be used to understand the emotional as well as structural divides in the sector. That then allows the possibility of integrating thinking so that leadership now is realistic and effective, and at the same time finds a place for imagining a different future.

## 2.    Leadership of thinking: What's love got to do with it?

Continuing the psychoanalytical approach, we move, naturally, to love. Gabriella Braun suggests there is a link to leadership:

- *Loving people requires the same qualities as leading people*

- *Love is part of our constructive side as people and helps us to keep our destructiveness at bay*

- *Resisting destructiveness is a vital part of leadership*

These are a number of assertions which are not fully substantiated in the report, for example: 'Destructiveness' is an interesting concept that is frequently associated with leadership. Braun chooses to concentrate on care, compassion etc. Hamlet's dilemma is solved by loving your organisation. Borrowing the phrase 'the drive for life' from Freud, the seminar considered how the positive could be retained in a destructive environment, such as a merger. The implication for the leadership of thinking is:

*The drive for life can inform and focus the primary purpose of the sector and of individual organisations. It can also be used to think about mergers and acquisitions; whether they should take place and how they are handled. Keeping the drive for life in mind means paying attention to the death of a closing organisation and allowing appropriate mourning so that individuals leaving it can move on. And so that the new organisation can continue and develop in a lively, life enhancing, way.*

This aspiration is not to be found in the small print of the area-based reviews, but it is an aspiration which can be associated with strongly led mergers. However, the present trend in many parts of the country towards voluntary mergers does not support the next conclusion:

*The current understandable preoccupation with survival in the sector increases resistance to change, which in turn is likely to increase the chance of individual organisations being closed. Leading the sector and its organisations from and towards the constructiveness of love and its drive for life, might be a way of reconceiving aspects of change and the way it's led.*

The participants in the seminar appear to describe a low point in an organisation's like-cycle, when the sense of purpose is lost and management time is drained by conflict and grievance.

*The current narrative in the sector seems plagued by deprivation and despair about the negative images it repeatedly attracts, its place in the education sector and the constant interference by governments. Does the necessary focus on survival, reduce leadership to a defensive battle ground? A place that reinforces deprivation and despair because it's so hard to find much liveliness there? If so, there's a major leadership task to stop the vicious circle of psychological deprivation and enable a shift towards life. To a new narrative, a new place from which to be inspired, to inspire and lead. To do that the capacity for gratitude and appreciation has to be developed throughout the sector. Otherwise the destructive pull, rather than the pull towards life, will inevitably dominate.*

This generates a discussion on self-esteem, and the poor corporate image referred to in the first seminar.

*The internalised identity within the sector which seems to believe itself … to be second class and perhaps second rate, will stall healthy development. A key and urgent task for the leadership of thinking is therefore to explore identity and self-esteem issues both systemically and psychoanalytically so that the sector can be released from the imprisoned and imprisoning place it occupies.*

So, in coming to a positive conclusion, love does matter.

*Leading the sector forward in the context of the current environment, requires the robustness of love which is at the heart of our constructiveness and drive for life … Bringing the qualities of love to the leadership of thinking can open up agency, different conversations and the possibility of imagining different futures for the sector.*

### 3. Leadership of thinking: What's attachment got to do with it?

This seminar looked at attachment theory as it applies to employee engagement. The section works its way through attachment theory. The subsequent seminar discussion identified:

*The 'shocking' way in which FE can see leadership as vested in a single person and how 'presidential' Principals can be. Since the head of a FE college or workplace provider will not be able to meet the attachment needs of all the staff singlehandedly, we wonder if this leadership style actually fosters insecure attachment and unhealthy dependency.*

This may have been the case in an older style of FE college but hardly describes the more distributed leadership style being developed in the newly emerging larger colleges. The seminar explored ways of supporting staff and their expectations:

*Attachment theory shows us the importance of fairness, consistency and reliability in fostering a 'secure base'. Participants talked about the complexity of being fair as leaders; in particular when fairness is seen as the same as equality.*

'Fairness' is a slippery, subjective term: fair to whom, and from what perspective? It becomes linked, in the ensuing discussion, to a perceived sense of insecurity:

*Insecurity may well have been bred into the whole sector since, as one participant said: 'FE didn't have a secure birth … When skills joined the sector there was an attitude of "oh now there's someone else to blame".'*

It is difficult to follow the argument here. The obvious point is that skills have always been fundamental to the sector, and the reference seems to be to a period when FE may be said to have drifted away from its mission into providing more general qualifications. This would create insecurity in those employees not qualified to participate in a refocussing on skills. The implication identified for the leadership of thinking is: if leaders don't help the sector recover from a sense of insecure start in life, FE and skills will remain hindered in its capacity to innovate. Certainly, this reflects the conventional view in the minds of some policymakers that FE is constrained in its growth and flexibility by employees with near redundant skills.

*Supporting attachment in teams is a key way of developing engagement in the workplace … impact on change and re-structuring provides important data in engagement… It can also inform decisions about re-structuring and ways of supporting change processes…*

*The thinking needs to include the impact of attachment, separation and loss, and finding ways of helping staff to separate from the past and deal with the consequent loss involved.*

Yet surely 'attachment' and 'separating from the past' are contrary notions? As one seminar participant observed: 'One difficulty for leaders is… the strength of attachment… to what we used to do.'

However, the seminar moves on to accept the need for change.

*Attachment and engagement have implications at all levels in the sector and in its wider environment. This includes the need for security and the negative impact of insecurity… attachment theory could help to create a strengthened sector, respond to external pressures, shape its future and find solutions to challenges.*

### 4.  Leadership of thinking: What's presence got to do with it?

'Presence' underpins emotional intelligence. Participants in the seminar linked their presence as a leader to the organisation's purpose and primary task.

*So presence in leadership is about person, role and system. It requires leaders to internalise and live the role rather than mimicking what they think it should be about. Leaders are then able to be themselves, be on task, in the service of the organisation and have the necessary potential freedom and spontaneity for innovation and development.*

While much of the report deals with the connectivity of leadership, this section confronts the potential loneliness of the leader, the weight of ultimate responsibility.

*Leadership is so often felt to be lonely; we don't distinguish between loneliness and aloneness in leadership. The ability to be alone is a requirement of the leadership of thinking. Without it we can't retain our own thinking and identity, or hold ultimate responsibility. Being our true self and emotionally present allows us to be alone, rather than lonely.*

It's a fine distinction, which might be seen as no more than a play on words.

There follows a discussion of psychological processes and defences. Defensive behaviour leads to compliance. So:

*An emotionally present organisational culture will necessarily go beyond compliance, since compliance alone is akin to the false self. The leadership of thinking at organisational and sector level needs to support and encourage staff to move beyond compliance through engagement and commitment to task and purpose. To move, in other words, to something akin to the true self.*

The leader has to get beyond 'political expediency and ideology':

*Thinking and actions can then be creative, fertile, allow experimentation include spontaneity, being adventurous, 'going off piste.' This is part of the intuitive side of leadership. It links to the healthy capacity for (informed) risk taking. It seems to us to be both an important indicator of emotional presence and at a premium in the current context of FE and Skills.*

Again, this is assertion. It is possibly also glib. Risk-taking is a complex business, and despite the optimistic up-beat tone of the text, risk-taking can be disastrous for both the institution and the leader. College principals' careers often shadow those of football managers. FE remains the play thing of politics, and the levers of funding and inspection are strong enough to wreak havoc with any institution that innovates too far out of line.

*Meaning and identity without emotional presence is sterile and subject to the whim of others. If the sector is to be protected, developed, robust and fit for the challenges it faces now and in the future, making meaning emotionally present is a critical task of leadership.*

OK. But not if you put your head too far above the parapet.

### 5.  Leadership of thinking: What's compulsion got to do with it?

In this seminar we are back to Freud, and his theory of repetitive compulsion. Again, there are assumptions that are not properly tested, such as that leaders suffer constant stress. It is claimed that overwork is commonplace, while the notion of wellbeing is also accepted. This sets up the sort of paradox that Freud would have enjoyed. But I fear there may be an unreal stereotype here. 'I never switch off from work' claims one participant. This is no doubt true for that participant, but is hardly the basis for generalising across all leadership in the sector. It is acknowledged however that flexible working, as opposed to 9.00-5.00, may be a new feature of developing leadership styles.

*The wellbeing agenda is trying to address the significant cost of workplace stress through absenteeism and mental health issues. To take this seriously and encourage meaningful change in the sector, leaders need to understand the deep-seated compulsion to repeat actions and attitudes that perpetuate stress in the sector – a destructive, unthinking, repetition. This understanding needs*

to both take account of, and inform, the complex reality of flexible working and how it can encourage wellbeing.

The seminar moves on to an interesting discussion around externally and internally generated stress. A picture emerges of sector leaders as stress heads. Again there is an assertion of the sector's low self-esteem.

*The problematic identity, low self-esteem and status of FE and Skills seems to result in repeatedly agreeing to impossible tasks demanded – repeatedly – of the sector. These tasks then serve to demonstrate the sector's apparent inability and low status. This in turn pushes the sector to endeavour to 'prove' itself by taking on more impossible tasks. It seems to us that the leadership of thinking needs to halt this vicious circle by encouraging understanding of the destructive pattern and building a different image the sector has of itself and that others have of it.*

Constant change is seen as unsettling: there are references to bullying, second-class, social defences. This seems to accurately capture the nature of many staffroom moans, but it is not borne out in the wider study of leadership.

*The social defence system of the sector and its implications for leadership needs exploring. Are there ways in which this blocks the sector's health and wellbeing? Are leaders pulled towards a repeated fixing, rather than a strategic re-imagining? A key task for the leadership of thinking is to connect unconscious beliefs to conscious behaviours and actions so that the sector can gradually change – and that includes changing aspects of its social defence system.*

At this point there does seem to have been a rebalancing in the seminar, with participants stating that this didn't represent their experience, but this has not impacted on the conclusion.

*The sector will continue to be undermined and weakened externally and internally if, on the one hand, leaders cannot bring together views and represent a collective with more authority and status. And, on the other hand, if leaders cannot disconnect the sector from its own internal perceptions of deprivation and victim hood where these have taken hold either consciously or unconsciously and continue to be passed onto staff.*

Surely this is the stuff of popular stereotypes. However, the conclusion has a positive note.

*The leadership of thinking needs to develop the capacity for resistance. Resistance against deviating from primary purpose and task (while remaining adaptive), against attacks on thinking, against the impossible task (or how it's implemented) generated*

from within and without. And against compulsive behaviours that reduce the possibility of imagining and re-imaging a healthy, not compulsive, way forward and future for the sector.

## 6.   Leadership of thinking: What's persecution got to do with it?

This section looks at psychological models for persecution (a facet of the super-ego) and how persecution may impact on the leader's thinking. Causes cited are: funding cuts, Ofsted, restructuring, staff attitudes and expectations, etc.

*The leadership of thinking therefore needs to address the root causes of persecutory feelings and look at ways of creating a more benign environment: one in which leaders can manage their own feelings of persecution and reduce the tendency to persecute others.*

Participants felt that the continual change in the sector increased the sense of persecution.

*Leaders need to think about their behaviour and the organisational culture in relation to staff's persecutory feelings.*

Interestingly, the seminar discussion moves on to discuss a leader's feeling of autonomy, and how this is limited by the eternal pressures described above. This issue undoubtedly deserves further investigation, particularly as the leadership challenge moves on from confronting austerity to the challenges that come with devolution and regionalism.

*Leadership in the sector may be hampered by a lack of clarity about the reality and specificity of autonomy and freedom… This needs to include diagnosing if such feelings stem from a lack of autonomy and/or from unresolved wishes and confusion about the precise nature of autonomy leaders in the sector can have.*

What was not discussed in this seminar, for obvious reasons, was the issue of whether or not a leader is up to the job. This is a consequence of continual change. The job which many college principals now undertake is significantly different to the one to which they were appointed, and this, in itself, would merit further investigation.

*Leaders need to be able to distinguish between feelings of persecution and actually being persecuted.*

## 7.   Leadership of thinking: What's loss got to do with it?

Change produces loss: a sense of that is where we were before, and are not now. Going back to Freud, it can be unhealthy not to acknowledge, and mourn, loss. The seminar found lots to mourn; loss of institutions, curriculum, even lost youth. Some participants felt they embraced change, others were ground down by it, to the point of considering leaving their post.

*The far-reaching loss in organisations across the sector is acute and painful. The leadership of thinking needs to acknowledge this and help the sector to mourn so that it can, as Freud said, 'decathect' from the past, adapt to the future and create new life.*

If not dealt with properly, this sense of loss can lead to a depressed organisation (who has not experienced a staff room dedicated to nostalgia and grief?).

*The leadership of thinking needs to explore illusion and disillusion and generate dialogue about loss. It needs to identify processes of change that supports healthy mourning.*

The implication is to involve staff in the change process. Few would disagree that this is good advice to all leaders.

*Unexpressed, unacknowledged and denied emotions seem to commonly get entangled… Disentangling emotions, understanding what's behind them and the link between particular feelings and their expression, is vital to establishing healthier organisations and a more robust, resilient sector with a genuine capacity for change and development.*

The sector is facing continuous change, and thus continual loss. Sometimes change fails, enhancing the sense of loss.

*Facing loss is enormously difficult and painful, yet it's life enhancing. Without it depression can turn the sector inwards and against itself… The leadership of thinking needs to keep the drive for life and stave off the destructive drive, which a failure to mourn supports.*

## 8. Leadership of thinking: What's Aggression Got To Do With It

There can be healthy aggression. It was seen initially in a negative way by participants, but the seminar went on to recognise its positive aspects.

*In order to use aggression constructively leaders need to be able to distinguish between their own constructive and destructive aggression.*

It's seen as part of the leadership tool kit. It's linked to authority:

*Aggression is essential to managing performance.*

The discussion moves on to consider how this can relate to the setting of impossible targets. This can encourage destructive aggression and staffroom backbiting. Should the sector be more aggressive, to counter low esteem and impossible demands?

*The lack of constructive aggression in the sector reduces the capacity it has to stand up for itself, be counted, articulate professional views and judgements… The leadership of thinking should support dialogue to explore what and when the sector should healthily 'fight' in relation to its purpose and primary task, and how to unify to do this.*

Again, there is an assertion that the primary task of the sector is about learning and development. Aggression is needed for survival. The argument seems to break down a little here. Schools and universities are also about learning and development; FE differs in that it brings in a tighter focus. If FE is coming from a weak base, aggression may not be the best strategy.

*The leadership of thinking needs to consider some fundamental issues about the use of aggression in taking the sector forward: is the aggression driving the transformation of the sector being used healthily?*

## 9. Leadership of thinking: What's Oedipus got to do with it?

This is an eye-catching title. It has to do with exclusion, difference, turning a blind eye and succession. The seminar heard tales of boundaries that go wrong. Furthermore, triangular senior leadership structures can have problems. One might feel excluded.

*Feeling excluded at times is ordinary, painful and inevitable. Leaders need to be aware of how this might be affecting interpersonal relationships, team work and organisational dynamics or indeed a result of them. Leaders also need to take sibling rivalry into account in the way they lead.*

Sometimes the analogy appears a little far-fetched, crossing one boundary too many.

*It would be helpful for the leadership … to consider the implications of the triangle of students, teachers and leadership/management: for learning and development, student success, organisational development and wellbeing, and for the development of the sector. What does this mean for supporting constructive development rather than, as in Oedipus' case, halted or perverted development?*

A discussion on pairings in the triangle concludes:

*The leadership of thinking can strengthen leadership in and of the sector by exploring how the paternal and maternal leadership aspects function and work together. This includes considering the respective roles of governance and senior leadership. It also involves exploring the way paternal and maternal function are both utilised with a role – of leadership, management, teaching, caretaking and so on.*

In the play, everyone turns a blind eye. Should leaders also, at times, turn a blind eye?

> *Turning a blind eye consciously is necessary from time to time but when it's a perpetual unconscious state, a turning away from truth and reality and ignoring critical damage, it's dangerous.*

The discussion moves on to succession. Again, this may be stretching the metaphor. There is, at present, little murder and incest in FE. But succession planning is a major factor in contemporary sector leadership thinking:

> *How does the leadership of thinking influence and encourage healthy rather than destructive, damaging succession? Succession that recognises the changing world of the sector and society and the need for integrity and positive identity alongside adaptation. Succession that maintains a focus on learning, development and inclusion.*

In a final thought on the implications for leadership of the sector, the difficulties of crossing boundaries are acknowledged:

> *Like the human psyche, FE and Skills has strengths, limits, possiblities and frailties.*

However, the fundamental value of the exercise is affirmed.

> *This means allowing space for reflection, connecting thinking with feeling, and giving space for creativity and imagination. Including the imagination to envisage and lead towards a different, successful future for the sector in a new and evolving reality.*

This is crossing boundaries in its widest sense. Naturally, it comes across as rather idealistic, but this has been an essay in liberated thinking, untrammelled by daily realities, and as such it is a valuable stimulus.

## Possibility thinking: Reimagining the future of further education and skills

---

### Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA)

In July 2016, FETL published, jointly with the RSA, *Possibility Thinking: Reimagining the Future of Further Education and Skills.*[14] In this, eight think pieces by eminent authors and practitioners offer a stimulating, or provocative, 'What if?' question. This picks up on the theme, if not quite of crossing boundaries, certainly of moving outside of the box.

---

14   Edited by Mark Londesborough (2016).

As Mark Londesborough says in his introduction 'The immediate future represents another existential turning point for the FE and Skills sector'. He argues that it is a time when the sector can reclaim a sense of urgency. The essay are 'deliberately optimistic'.

1.   **What if the further education and skills sector became a genuinely self-improving system with the trust and capacity to determine its own future?** – Philip Cordingly and Paul Crisp.

Colleges and providers frequently question the judgements of inspection regimes. The challenge of an active market had led to tight controls on the college's image and the development of 'marketing glossies'.

> *What if leadership at every level in the sector was intently focussed on enhancing quality and depth in vocational learning and achievement?*

This would require evidence. The authors argue that self-evaluation is relatively under-developed in the sector, particularly concerning the nature of vocational teaching and learning. An example given is the Activate Learning Group of colleges in Oxfordshire which is learning from the teaching schools and, by inference, the teaching hospitals concept. This would embed continuous improvement rather than the 'brittleness' of current marketing regimes. What is needed, the piece argues, is a sustainable, self-improving system.

2.   **What if the development of learners' creative capacities were put at the heart of all apprenticeships?** – Pauline Tambling

Starting from the observation that few occupations or careers are for life, Tambling argues that the challenge for FE and skills is how to go beyond specialisation, noting that apprenticeships, in particular, may be seen as prone to undue specialisation. This is a persuasive argument which should stimulate a strategic discussion around the over-arching structure and purpose of apprenticeships. The interests of young people outside of study, particularly in their interactions with social media, is explored. Creativity is introduced as an important element here.

Tambling then outlines the strengths of the creative industries, and the threats to other occupations from automation. There is an assumption here that all occupations in the creative industries involve creativity in the first sense used. Somehow creativity becomes the answer to automation. Should this be built in to apprenticeships? Two suggestions are offered: that apprenticeships should offer more opportunity for collaborative work (as in the TV show, *The Apprentice*), and a return to the concept of an 'apprentice piece', some form of creative artefact.

Creativity, Tambling tells us, is being squeezed out of the curriculum. Few would disagree; most will deplore. But while this argument has great merit, it is a different argument. As is convincingly stated in

conclusion, 'Increasingly, more and more employers are realising the need for flexible all-rounders with a positive attitude and a willingness to work hard'. This is the core of a very important point, and it is vital that it becomes factored into the strategic planning of apprenticeships. Creativity doubtless features here, but the issue is broader and greater than that alone.

### 3. What if the further education and skills sector realised the full potential of vocational pedagogy? – Bill Lucas

Bill Lucas' think piece picks up the theme of broadening vocational teaching and learning. It is a provocative piece buzzing with ideas and suggestions for broadening the vocational curriculum. The scholarship is sound and the piece well referenced. Like Tambling, he sees vocational pedagogy as far broader than skills. Indeed, in his conclusion he calls for a vocational element, in its widest sense, in all of the key stages. He offers a list of six desired outcomes, running from routine experience to wider skills for growth.[15] It's a good list, getting to the core of employability, and it would be a worthwhile outcome if it were more widely recognised.

He goes on to offer us a triangle, the points being physical materials, people and symbols. Occupations are mapped into the triangle according to the relative importance of each. Along comes another list, of teaching and learning methods, learning from experts, practising, hands on, etc. What is being proposed is a complex, three-dimensional matrix of pedagogic strategies, content, nature of learning, and learning processes which could, Lucas claims, underpin a dramatic improvement in vocational pedagogy. This is seen as a way to dramatically improve learner outcomes and progression and, on the wider scale, economic performance in a global context.

The conclusion is clear. Vocational pedagogy should start at primary school and be embedded in all subjects because it is about the development of capabilities (another list).

### 4. What if construction training got out of the college and popped up on site? – Rowan Conway and Oliver Broadbent

This think piece focuses on construction, but it could be about skills in general. Industry is responding to technological and demographic shifts. Traditional, college-based training is at risk of being too narrow, of being too supply side orientated. Future progress needs to focus on the (employer) demand side, providing skills when and where needed, maintaining a sense of commitment to local communities. This is central to the skills discussion sparked off by the report of the Commission of Adult Vocational Education and Training.[16]

Construction is fortunate to have an industrial training board which can think about these things, 'encouraging strategic relationships with FE colleges and training providers'. The building of the Olympic

Park provided a good example of skills being provided on site. To avoid the problems inherent in over-specialisation, the piece suggests pop-up environments, or on-site training hubs. This can integrate with the functioning of the site, helping manufacturers to train contractors.

Thus the concept of the Big Rig, a consultancy proposal, promoting careers in construction on site. It is a specific example of possibility thinking: as such it narrows the focus of the broad sweep of the think piece opening, but it does present a valid and working example of what can be done.

### 5. What if further education and skills led the way in integrating artificial intelligence into learning environments? – Sir Michael Barber

This think piece is a vision of the future. Visions, in general, have a poor track record: technology and demographics have a way of outwitting the sage. But this piece also asks some searching questions of today. Glancing at the rapid progress of technology and the skills required to service it, the assertion is made that FE will have to become more productive, learners will have to acquire a wider set of skills, achieved faster, and at higher levels of performance. The argument runs that learners will be able to acquire high-level skills (like empathy) and concrete skills (like nursing) in virtual learning environments. 'Vocational learning will become much more collaborative.'

This raises an interesting question. To date, distance learning has not really taken off. The Open University continues its good work, and employers use training packages for highly motivated learners, but the bulk of further and higher education remains a social activity, involving face-to-face contact with lecturers and creating opportunities for peer group learning. Will artificial intelligence get to the point where it can replicate this and displace collegiate activity?

The piece returns to more conventional futurology. Lecturers, liberated from administration become 'learning orchestrators', apprentices can augment the experience of their immediate physical environment. Personalised artificial intelligence will solve the maths problem. Artificial intelligence will become sensitive to the individual's needs and develop a sense of timing activities appropriately.

The world of work will change, from mechanical function to nuanced interactions. FE can take a lead in this. The building blocks are there for a new wave of 'entrepreneurial learning innovation'.

This represents a completely new take on the notion of the local college, freed from its physical location.

---

15     These are: routine experience, resourcefulness, craftsmanship, functional literacies, business-like attitudes, wider skills for growth.

16     Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning. 2013. *It's about work… Excellent adult vocational teaching and learning.*

## 6.  What if further education colleges led a 'Cities of Learning' movement in the UK? – Anthony Painter

Painter looks to a revitalised FE sector, shaking off the misplaced criticisms of recent years, towards a revived function at the centre of skill provision. He draws stimulus from the US where city transformations of learning have brought together existing institutions to collaborate on a new digital learning platform. Painter identifies local connections which can come together during the present trend towards devolution: adults' skills markets, sub-regional authorities, the area-based review process, apprenticeships and closer links to employers. He describes a model which is in line with the skills eco-systems thinking being developed by UCL and others.

Drawing on a previous study[17] which identified degrees of engagement with online learning by segments of the population, he sees in the US cities of learning model the potential for a digitally accessed area based curriculum, where the city (in the US case) is networked for learning. Leadership is seen as vital. FE, Painter argues, has the potential to take on this leadership, the college becoming an essential driver of regional dynamism.

## 7.  What if the decisions of both learners and leaders in further education and skills were based on hard data about what really works? – Charlotte Alldritt

Alldritt starts by applauding the data-rich approach of Alison Wolf.[18] The ravages of austerity upon the FE sector in recent years have not been supported in their implementation by hard data, nor do FE colleges themselves fully understand or track their impact or outcomes. Data is needed so that the sector may understand itself. She describes recently improved access to data, for example the National Pupil Database, Individual Learner Records, and higher education statistics. Data can potentially be linked to taxation records, introducing new ways of assessing impact and accountability in the provision of skills. This will help both learners and providers to make better choices, based on information from the local area. She calls for this enhanced data to be available in a digestible form. It should be part of an improved data profile for all stages of education. At that point, FE will be better placed to demonstrate its value.

## 8.  What if further education colleges went for bold transformation instead of incremental change? – Paul Little

As the founding principal of a Scottish 'super college', Little is well placed to comment on bold transformation. There has been a steady build up, with the momentum to merger accelerated in England by the area-based review process and, more widely, a general trend towards devolution. The perimeters of legacy colleges have become permeable in this new move to the large grouping. This Scottish example is remarkable in that the process of merger has been taken in active collaboration with a large number of employers, including collaboration at the global level. The college has spurned the notion of becoming an exclusively HE institution, resolutely retaining its role in promoting social mobility, but continuing to articulate with HE. Being a super college has enhanced the scale, and therefore the political and civic clout of the college. Little speaks of real-time partnership with industry and commerce, requiring a scale of technology commensurate with the scale of the super college. It's a big player in Scotland, and in the world.

Mergers are very complex programmes of cultural change, says Little, his enthusiasm clear at every stage. His is a robust vision for a college, committed to its industrial roots, but providing a bold and scaled vision for the future.

---

17   Painter, A. and Bamfield, L. 2015. *The new digital learning age.* RSA

18   *Review of Vocational Education,* 2011

# Afterword

_____

The Further Education Trust for Leadership states in its mission that it seeks to strengthen and support the leadership of thinking in further education and skills. In pursuing this, FETL has funded, and continues to fund, a range of opportunities for those associated with further education so that they may research the nature of leadership within the sector.

The projects and think pieces described here represent a part of FETL's wider support for the leadership of thinking in the sector. Individually and cumulatively, these pieces help stimulate intelligent and creative thinking about the sector. Their authors have been able to think outside the box. The developing nature of leadership in the sector is seen to permeate the wider social, demographic and economic context in which the sector is embedded.

It is clear from the accumulated evidence of this research that leaders in further education are the forerunners in new approaches to bringing together a fresh and effective strategy with regard to institutional, civic and economic necessities.

First, the leader in further education has to look well beyond the boundaries of the college. Within these studies there are examples of how FE is part of a wider system, changes to the institution having a ripple effect through the wider skills eco-system. This includes reviewing the role of governance in a devolved Welsh system, and assessing its potential impact, as with Bebb, calling for data to measure the long-term impact on students and society, as Alldritt does, or calling for bold, systemic transformation, as does Little.

Second, this promotion of change is not driven by a narrow sense of self-interest. Consistently in this research, it is the welfare and interest of students and the effective contribution to economic wellbeing that emerge as the drivers. The team at Hull University explore this ethical, altruistic dimension in detail, but it is present throughout, for example in Cordingley and Crisp looking at self-improvement and EMFEC examining how to improve governance.

Third, in order to achieve this, in its present circumstances, the leaders in the further education and skills sector have to move out of their comfort spheres and cross many boundaries. The studies described here look to the world of business to help improve practice, bring in governors and leaders from other sectors, learn lessons from the realm of psychanalysis, and look, as Tambling does, to a new curriculum based on creativity or, as Lucas does, to a new vocational pedagogy. Both Barber, and Conway and Broadbent, discuss escaping the physical institution to promote new forms of learning.

All this energy requires new approaches, new thinking. And in this, FETL has fulfilled its role in supporting the leadership of that thinking. The series of publications described here, taken as a whole, represent a complex iteration across the three models of leadership in further education and skills proposed earlier. Skills eco-systems with collaborative stakeholder relationships, boundary-crossing practices, and collaborative altruistic leadership each shed valuable light on leading thinking, but individually they do not necessarily provoke the wholescale expansion in thinking that the sector needs. However, the creative combination of the three, as emerges from these FETL publications, should inspire and enable leaders to mobilise those around them, those who have knowledge and expertise within the wider system, to stimulate and implement change.

**Paul Grainger is Co-Director and Director of Operations at the Centre for Post-14 Education and Work, University College London Institute of Education**