

# FEDA strategy session: the post-16 review

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**Browns Courtrooms, London WC2**

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**18 May 1999**

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This report reflects the main themes of a FEDA strategy session that took place in London on 18 May – before the publication of the Government’s White Paper *Learning to succeed – a new framework for post-16 learning*. This was led by Peter Ashby of Open Agenda. Quotations in the text are from the session.

Although the report tries to capture the general balance of the debate, it does not seek to reflect the views of all participants at every stage of the discussions. Nor does it represent a policy statement by FEDA.

A list of participants has been circulated separately to those who were involved.

Peter Ashby is an independent consultant specialising in lifelong learning and employment. This was the fourth strategy session that he has led for FEDA. During the past 12 years he has worked as a Fellow at St George’s House, Windsor Castle, where he developed a distinctive style running sessions with an ‘open agenda’. Peter was formerly an official of the TUC, and is now working closely with the DfEE taking forward elements of the Government’s lifelong learning agenda.

## **‘Putting the individual learner at the centre’**

It should be said that a good number of the 27 participants in this brainstorming session were distinctly wary of the Government’s review of post-16 education and training. They were wary of change that is ‘structure-driven’, and felt keenly that we need a ‘paradigm shift, so that we really put the learner at the centre of everything that we do’. And when we asked how much colleges actually **do** that at the moment, the answer came back, with great candour, ‘we like to think that we do, but more often than not, we don’t’. Why not? This time, the answer was quicker, ‘because we’re engaged with **institutional survival**, that’s why.’ We were also concerned to tackle the ‘lack of self-belief’ that has held back some people in the sector – and stopped us from questioning a little more the very **language** of sectors, that doesn’t always fit easily with the idea of putting the learner at the centre. We wanted a more inclusive agenda, that enables everyone offering learning to ‘reach out more confidently’ to prospective learners. We wanted to be careful **not** to ‘sacrifice a lot of good innovation that is going on at the moment, for the sake of strategic planning’. We wanted ‘more **risk-taking** at national, as well as local level’, ‘less preoccupation with **formal** education’, and changes in the national system to ensure ‘equity, consistency and standards’. We also wanted the review to stop being driven so much by ‘the **old TEC contracting paradigm**’, and to get more onto new ground, and higher ground, concerned with strengthening the whole system locally as well as nationally, so that at every key stage the individual learner is offered ‘equal choices of equal quality’. Yes, we were ambitious in what we wanted from the review. Our commitment to a new learning age required nothing less.

## ‘Generating more demand for learning’

Early on during the session, one principal raised a key issue, with great force. ‘So much of our discussion about lifelong learning seems to be predicated upon the assumption that **everyone wants to learn**.

This just isn’t proven.’ We were keen to keep this in our sights, and not imply that there is a tidal wave of demand waiting to engulf those currently providing learning!

The real challenge is to ‘generate more demand for learning’, and persuade those who are reluctant to learn (or even hostile to the very idea) to dip their toe in the water – and then **keep on dipping**, time and again.

Part of the answer, we felt, is for all college principals and staff to ‘put their own learning at the centre of their lives’. As one principal said, ‘leaders need to **live lifelong learning**, and be seen to be living it’.

## ‘Leaving behind the politics of competition’

One participant told of the dilemma she currently faces in relation to the education of her teenage son, who is currently coming up to his GCSEs. She suspected that he would end up choosing the best option for him, ‘out of a series of imperfect options’, but only because of his ‘pushy, middle-class parents’. She feared that youngsters who **don’t** have such pushy parents would lose out badly, unless action is taken to ensure that they are not the victims of inter-institutional rivalry in the way that can so easily happen at present. This concern about childrens’ futures being dependent upon their parents working the system underlined for us how important it is to try and ‘leave behind the politics of competition’ that has done so much damage to the relationships between colleges, schools and other providers in recent years.

Some felt that the way ahead lies in the development of ‘strong local learning communities’ which would bring institutions much closer to each other. We were looking to the review to give important signals to help bring local providers into closer – and mutually supportive – working relationships.

This was why many felt such goodwill towards the emerging Lifelong Learning Partnerships.

## Lifelong Learning Partnerships and ‘softer boundaries’

We felt that Lifelong Learning Partnerships could do much to help create stronger learning communities, and ensure ‘softer boundaries’ between the various institutional players, as well as institutions and other providers of learning opportunities and support. At the same time, there were some fears. Would ‘fuzzy boundaries’ mean institutions losing their identities? And what exactly would local Lifelong Learning Partnerships **do**? They might seem ‘great for providers’ (initially, at least!), but what could they be expected to **achieve** as voluntary – and pretty consensual – bodies?

Some suggested that they should have a funding role (‘funding is a great driver’), and one principal went so far as to suggest that ‘[Lifelong Learning] Partnerships should have responsibility for **all bid funding**’.

At this stage, however, others began to look uneasy. They feared that the Partnerships could easily end up ‘mediating between competing providers’ and taking on the sort of role that has been played by TECs – and just **hasn’t worked**.

## ‘Taking out under-performing provision’

Some wondered whether, the main emphasis should be on the Partnerships having more of a planning and monitoring role, and taking on responsibility for approving the plans of colleges and other providers in their area. It would, of course, be important that their plans were not simply ‘aggregates of those individual partners’, and they did actually introduce some greater **coherence** into the system (partly through linking up closely with Regional Development Agencies).

This seemed to attract more support, and it was said that the Partnerships could not only ‘help to make institutions and provision **gel**’, but also help ‘take out under-performing providers’. They don’t have to be the people handing out cash to carry clout with local providers. So long as their advice is **seen to count** among those responsible for provider funding they can play a key role.

## When does a partnership become something else?

Through this debate about the future role of Lifelong Learning Partnerships we became conscious of a real policy dilemma. Give the Partnerships a fairly soft role, as the ‘blurrers of boundaries’ and ‘thinkers of new ideas’, and they will be accused (as someone said at this session) of being little more than a ‘cosmetic exercise’. Also, there will be a danger that some of the key players, who need to give the time to attend their local Partnership for it to be seen as weighty, **won’t attend** because they think it’s a bit of a talking shop. That’s why, according to some, Partnerships should have **real financial responsibilities**, and take decisions about how to give out Government cash. Then the ‘movers and shakers’ would turn up for meetings! But **what sort of body** would be meeting? That’s the question, and the heart of the dilemma. We felt that it wouldn’t any longer be a partnership; instead, it would have become ‘an executive body’. This leads to the conclusion that if Partnerships are not to be given significant financial responsibilities, and instead limited (a word which will be used by some) to an advisory and monitoring role, the procedures for listening to and acting upon their advice will need to be clear, and impressive. Otherwise, busy leaders of local learning communities will not give Partnerships their time. And without the right people, Partnerships will be a waste of **everyone’s time**.

## Learning lessons from Wales

One principal pointed out that some of the most successful institutions are quite unapologetic about promoting themselves, and it could be a **mistake** if blurring of boundaries meant institutions holding back **too much!** That said, we generally remained keen on the idea of Lifelong Learning Partnerships helping to ‘soften boundaries’ between local institutions and introduce greater coherence into local provision. We then went on to ask ourselves: what is the **next stage** after a blurring of boundaries, and closer cooperation among local institutions? That was when we heard about the thinking of FE colleges and their partners in Wales, and the idea of developing closer ‘community consortia and groupings’. They would evolve in different ways in different areas, depending upon the particular mix of partners. What struck us was that, even though they are still very much at the concept stage, they could come to play a **key role** in the whole process of generating increased demand for learning. They could be especially important if we see them not as consortia set up at the behest of Government, but as consortia brought into being at the behest of the best providers in their area (as is already happening in some major cities).

## Making Partnerships ‘good business’ for their members

The concept here is very simple, but immensely powerful. It is that instead of seeing the Partnerships and consortia as there to take forward the Government’s agenda, we should see them as there to take forward their own agenda. The one thing they should have in common is a **shared business interest** in a substantial increase in the number of customers coming forward to participate in learning. So let’s focus on the **business case** for providers working together – and planning their provision together – as partners, on the basis that they also take on a shared responsibility for seeking to generate increased demand for learning. It benefits their businesses, strengthens the local learning community, and all makes complete sense.

But first, it requires Partnerships **not** to look just to Government to set their agenda for them.

## Colleges as ‘local learning champions’

At one stage in the debate, one participant expressed concern about what he saw as a rather ‘complacent attitude’ within the FE sector. ‘In so much of further education, there seems to be the unspoken assumption that local = good, and national = bad. I want to question that. I think the best way ahead is a **truly national structure**.’ With such a provocative challenge, we felt that we had to ask how everyone responded to the question ‘is the way ahead truly a national structure?’. A few were firmly in the yes camp, one was a definite no, and most of us were fence-sitters, arguing that we need stronger national **and** local structures. It should not be a choice between action at one level **or** the other, it should be about action at both levels.

However, some felt that this left unresolved the question of how colleges should define their role and we returned to this right at the end of the session. ‘I see myself as one of a number of local learning champions, **daring to be idealistic**,’ said one principal. Others talked of the need for ‘less separatism’ on the part of the sector in general. One principal was particularly forceful in arguing that colleges are ‘one part of the provision for a local area, rather than part of a national sector’. Some others disagreed, and defended the need to ‘put a boundary around ourselves as a sector’.

If anything, the balance of the debate seemed to be on the side of those who wanted to move away from the idea of further education as a distinctive sector, and take a more dynamic approach towards the changing role of further education – on the basis that all colleges should make their mark as ‘local learning champions’.

## Colleges ‘creating their own destiny’

The issue of incorporation, and institutional autonomy, came up during the session (surprise, surprise!). We recognised that it is seen by many as something of a sacred cow, but were also struck that some participants called for us to ‘do away with **all** sacred cows’. If local Partnerships and consortia really begin to work well together, to plan their provision together, and grow more substantial local learning markets together, why try and decide **now** what any constraints might be on how various partners combine with each other? If, and when, Partnerships and consortia reach lift-off, there will need to be some tough bargaining about how best to take forward their shared business interests. But we are not at that stage yet. Far from it. Some wondered whether there might be lessons to be learnt from the experiences of community college districts in the US. Might we see groups of institutions reconstituting themselves as unified ‘community colleges’ in the UK? Let’s at least be **open** to that possibility.

As for the Government’s review, there was clearly some **disappointment** that it isn’t turning out to be as radical as some had hoped it would be. In a sense, however, this wasn’t an entirely negative feeling. It sharpened up for us the importance of colleges being ‘more proactive in trying to create their own destiny’. After all, throughout the vast number of changes over the past 50 years or so, there has been one constant factor, and that has been **colleges**. And this has largely been because of their readiness to be proactive, and really engage with shaping their own destiny.

At the same time, we hoped that this review might help to set in train a more radical process of thinking on the part of Government. It was said that the real challenge is to achieve a ‘**genuine merger** between education and employment’ within the machinery of Government. Now, that **would** be getting radical – **a bit ‘third-way’, some might say!**

## Further information

Further copies of this report are available from FEDA’s website at <http://www.feda.ac.uk/download/reports/19990701c.pdf> (requires Acrobat Reader, available free from <http://www.adobe.com>)

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