



EMPLOYERS IN THE DRIVING SEAT?

New thinking for FE leadership

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ABOUT FETL

The Further Education Trust for Leadership's vision is of a further education sector that is valued and respected for:

- Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers;
- Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
- Sharing fresh ideas generously and informing practice with knowledge.

ABOUT AELP RESEARCH

AELP Research is a division of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) dedicated to conducting research activities that are in the interests of AELP members and the wider FE sector. AELP is a national membership organisation that represents the interests of more than 980 organisations that deliver the large majority of Britain's apprenticeships as well as English, maths, study programmes, and other vocational and technical qualifications.

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FOREWORD

Dame Ruth Silver

This report from the Association of Employment and Learning Providers is a very welcome contribution to the debate on the involvement of employers in further education and skills. The Further Education Trust for Leadership is pleased to have supported it and to publish it.

The government has made much of its apparent desire to 'put employers in the driving seat' but it has been less forthcoming about what this should mean in practice or how they intend to deliver what would be a quite significant change in the way the sector is run. As the study shows, few are convinced by the government's rhetoric, and there is little indication that employers are prepared or even particularly interested in fulfilling this role, as it is currently defined.

In the brave new post-Brexit world, in which the public purse strings are pulled tighter and we are obliged to do more of our own training rather than poaching talent from elsewhere, it will be even more important to ensure employers are contributing to the further education funding pot and playing a full role in shaping provision. Employer engagement is critical but it is far from clear that this requires putting them 'in the driving seat', or, indeed, whether this is desirable.

In fact, the rhetoric of employer engagement is far from new. For decades, politicians have scratched their heads about how employers can become more engaged in further education and skills and how a more direct line of sight can be established between the needs of employers and the provision offered by

the sector. I think back to the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative of the 1980s and the National Council for Vocational Qualifications, set up in the 1990s – both designed to address long-standing weaknesses in vocational education by aligning it more closely with the needs of industry.

In both these cases – and others – politicians failed to deliver on their promises, and the reforms did not persist. As a result, we are still asking ourselves the same questions today. How can we increase employer engagement in education and how can we ensure we meet their needs in a way that supports economic prosperity?

Where are we going wrong? I think, too often, ministers have tried to make public servants of employers, to change their ways and mind-sets, instead of understanding where they are coming from, what they want and how they see their role. As a result, employers lose interest, feel frustrated or ill-served, and withdraw, at great cost to learners and the sector, not to mention the Treasury and economy.

This study represents, among other things, an attempt to see if things have changed in the wake of the Richards review and other significant interventions. The answer would appear to be 'no', or at best 'not enough'. I think the issue is not so much who leads as how we work together in a way that maximises the contribution of each player and serves the best interests of the country.

What I find encouraging about this report is its thoughtful attempt to listen and to bring people from different sides of this question together. It represents a genuine attempt to find intelligent, constructive responses to challenging questions, and to establish some sort of consensus as to the way forward. On an issue where debate can often become defensive or oppositional, this is much needed.

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

FOREWORD

Mark Dawe

'It's just a tax and they don't listen to a word we say'

I am sitting on a train on a cold January evening as we enter a critical year, following the AELP Employer Forum. That was the employers' views, and they were big employers as well. When this FETL-funded project started, we worked on the assumption that FE was now operating in a much more employer-driven world across all aspects – curriculum, assessment, funding and delivery. But it would appear that the majority of employers we talk to haven't really seen much change.

Probably the key messages from this research are:

- Employers are no more in the driving seat now than they ever were and only big employers can be.
- Instead, the government has changed the narrative about the sector's purpose and the state is still really in the driving seat.
- Many employers prefer to rely on the expertise of training providers rather than doing it all themselves.
- Not much training would happen if providers weren't around.
- Frustration exists over not being able to meet SME demand for apprenticeships.
- Concern exists over not sufficiently meeting the needs of individual learners, lower skills provision and the social mobility agenda.

- The sector needs to blow its own trumpet more and be more assertive as to what its role should be.
- 'Just surviving' is now almost an aim in itself.

There has been fantastic and enthusiastic engagement across the FE sector in this project and there have been lively debates at every roundtable – from all the feedback during the work it felt like there would be a rich and positive story to tell. The report captures much of the sentiment and thoughts of those operating in the sector, including employers. However, when we looked at the conclusions it felt a bit flat – not a lot has changed and we need to just persevere with what we have always done, but it's just been made harder now. Not the most inspirational of conclusions to a substantial piece of research – but I do believe it does reflect the reality of the situation we find ourselves in – nearly 100 contributors and such an extensive literature review must surely be telling us something.

Since starting in my role at AELP, the incredible relationships and engagement that independent training providers (ITPs) have with their employers never cease to amaze me. I have been a college principal and to this day I still ask the question – why do the ITPs have 75 per cent of apprenticeship delivery and how do they manage to engage with employers in a way none of the rest of the education sector seems to be able to achieve? I think the simple answer is that it is in their DNA and is vital for their survival. From the CEO/MD down, in an ITP the focus is the employer; ensuring the ITP understands their needs and that they are flexible and responsive to meet those needs. Every system and process is designed to ensure that those needs are met alongside the individual apprentice/trainee/student. I don't think this came out strongly enough in the research and I keep asking myself why. I wonder whether it is that, for the ITP, this is just a base expectation and not something they feel is special and worth talking about. However, for everyone else, it is something very special.

So, let's unpick what is being said and try to shed some light on why we have the conclusions we do, and what we need to do about it.

First, every single person around the table seemed to agree that 'employer in the driving seat' was feeling more and more like rhetoric than reality. What is worse, some of the approaches and systems that were dear to the employers' hearts had been dismantled and the replacement felt worse, not better. While standards have generally been welcomed by employers and providers, the pain of the process for trailblazers and the lack of curriculum coordination sector by sector has led to a lot of dissatisfaction. Employers defined quality but were then told they couldn't have it. And when employers identify funding requirements, they are laughed off the stage.

For some individual employers it was great to drive a curriculum approach through the trailblazers, but that often doesn't seem to have satisfied the majority across all sectors. Certainly not a driving seat – lucky if it is passenger seat, possibly rear seat or a backwards-facing baby seat. The nightmare of the process and being told by civil servants that they didn't know what their industry needed, led employers to question whose agenda were they being asked to meet. These concerns continue today and there is a real danger of disengagement which is the absolute opposite of the stated aims of this government approach.

For the providers, the principles of standards are great and no one disagrees with employers having a significant say in the design of these standards. But the employers and the government are generally not delivery experts and they are certainly not assessment experts. It is these challenges that many of those round the table in our research were facing. So, from their perspective the aspiration for quality curriculum, delivery and assessment was not being met and, indeed, the previous system, although with its faults, actually did engage the various stakeholders in the right activity.

We continue to be told that a lot more money is being invested – however, the cost of delivery of each standard is higher, the range and level of courses is greater and the assessment is far more expensive by design. It would appear that no one did the maths and there are financial challenges already, whether in apprenticeships or the wider FE system.

So, maybe it is simply money that leads to the government being so unwilling to give up control; maybe that is why really they never handed over control and there was no driving seat for the employers to sit in? Even in higher education, where the finance was, in theory, handed over to the student, the Office for National Statistics has identified it wasn't really; it was government-backed debt, with half being written off, so the removal of number caps in HE has come back to bite the government hard – just watch the cap on numbers reappear. Whether it was the demand-led element (DLE) in the 1990s, Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) or Train to Gain (T2G) in the FE and skills sector, the government stimulated the market, lost control, exceeded the budget and closed down the programme – every attempt at a demand-led system has failed so far thanks to poor implementation and proper gatekeeping by the Department and its associated bodies.

So, for a system to be sustainable we need it to be designed in such a way that everyone feels in control of the elements they should be responsible for within a defined and sustainable system. At the moment, the research suggests that no-one feels like they are in control of anything – and I don't even think the government feels like it has much control at the moment! How have we got to this position?

We need a system that is based on a few fundamentals:

- **The curriculum and syllabus** – employers, alongside those experienced in articulating curriculum, should define the curriculum, and continuously review it with small tweaks and adjustments to keep it relevant year on year. Defining the knowledge, skills and behaviour needed in the workplace now and in the future is the

most fundamental role and it should be dominated by employers and those that work with them.

- **Assessment needs to be defined by assessment experts** (awarding bodies/Ofqual) to ensure a valid and reliable judgement of the knowledge, skills and behaviour that have been defined by the employers. This is not easy – but there are people who have spent their lives trying to get it right and they should be trusted to help define the approach.
- **The cost of delivery for training and assessment should be determined by those involved** (providers/Ofsted).

Any education and training system needs these fundamentals in place and they are non-negotiable no matter what other challenges there are.

However, the big (and probably main) issue is resource. We need more skills and have less money as a country. When this problem is not adequately tackled it seems the government distorts and disrupts the market and no-one feels in control.

To me, this is the disappointment that has been reflected in the research by all those involved in the FE system. More of the same, tweaking at the edges or chucking the blame around gets us nowhere. Individuals, employers and society need this to work.

So what green shoots from our work do we need to nurture and grow – what is it that needs to be done?

- Employers have been engaged and want to engage, they want to contribute but need some structure to work within and appropriate rules and guidance to follow. Many are not training and education experts, many are not assessment experts, but they certainly know the skills they want – so let's use the employers for what they are good at. Of course, if they want to deliver, if they want to assess, if they want to fulfil other roles, wonderful, but we cannot expect this at every level in every sector.

- It was right that government felt that there needed to be a step change, but their energy and the change was focused at the wrong things in the wrong way.
- Delivery has to change. Apprenticeship and skills training is about getting a job with education and training woven into the workplace.
- Technology is slowly being embraced – but it is slow. It should be woven into every aspect of the process. It isn't buildings we need – it is technology and access to the best employer facilities for those in training.
- The role of the teacher/facilitator/mentor needs to dramatically change – they need a new skill set. For example, we have heard a lot of talk about flipped learning but if you are asking those imparting knowledge to their students to flip their learning, it really is like turkeys voting for Christmas – they have to be shown the benefits and how their job still exists and indeed can be enhanced.

And what about government – certainly the ones that always get blamed for sitting firmly in the driving seat and not allowing anyone else close to it – what should they do?

- First, keep regulators and regulation simple. This isn't saying weak regulation but there is need for clarity as to who is in charge of what and what really matters when it comes to regulations
- Second, determine what scarce resource is available and how it will be targeted. This isn't saying the government should fund everything but everyone in the system needs to know what the government is funding, even if it is just a proportion of the whole – but don't reduce the funding to squeeze more out of the budget. This leads to poor quality, failure and non-delivery. What is clear from decades of failure is that attempting to control and fund the whole system always ends

in disaster. If providers believe the price is right they will always be willing to deliver. If employers believe that the training gives them the knowledge, skills and behaviour they need, they will be willing to invest where the government is not able to.

- Third, if a step change is needed, then fund the change properly (e.g. restructuring fund, pump priming, technology investment, staff development) and be very clear what the outcomes following the change should be. Too often, the inputs of change are funded but there are few or no consequences for failing to deliver the outcomes of that change for those that have taken all the money.

If everyone is allowed to drive the appropriate part of the system we should have something that everyone owns, and supports, and commits to make work. There are mini examples, or green shoots, where this is working now – it can be done. We heard about some of them during the research. But they are working despite the system, often bending the rules and often not a sustainable model.

I think our overarching conclusion is that the government remains stubbornly in the driving seat and, in that environment, improvements and aspirations are muted. However, with better utilisation of the right expertise in the right place, every part of the skills system, from the employer to the individual, from the regulator to the provider, from the government to the assessment organisation, could find itself in the driving seat best suited to it!

Mark Dawe is CEO, Association of Employment and Learning Providers

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, vocational skills and further education (FE) policy in England has seen a sustained rise in prominence in the role of employers in its shaping and purpose. Indeed, right across the education system, the notion of education and learning as having inherent worth is, it can be argued, losing ground to the primacy of the needs of industry, productivity and employers.

This report focuses on that part of the education system that provides just over £3 billion worth of publicly funded technical and vocational skills learning, mainly through general FE colleges, adult and community learning and independent training providers, to adults aged 16 and over in the UK, annually.¹ Current policy in this area has been described as putting ‘employers in the driving seat’. Current policy in this area has been described as putting ‘employers in the driving seat’, such as when then Skills Minister Matthew Hancock said in 2014 that ‘Our apprenticeship reforms are responding to the needs of employers by putting them in the driving seat’ (UK Parliament, 2014).

The phrase ‘employers in the driving seat’ was increasingly used in relation to UK skills policy in the latter years of the Conservative/ Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010–15 and appears to reflect a growing neo-liberal approach to FE that frames it in terms of its relevance to market, economic and industrial factors. Reflecting too on the major upheavals in the landscape of public expenditure over this period, we wished to examine how sector leaders in the field of FE were approaching this outlook – what effect might it have on their businesses, their outputs and their decision-making?

¹ For the purposes of this document, we refer to this sector as ‘further education’ or ‘FE’, while acknowledging that there is a broader definition of FE that encompasses other strands of learning, particularly academic. That is outside the scope of the work we have done here.

With reference to the technical and vocational sector, therefore, our research sought answers to the following questions:

- Does the sector agree that employers are in the driving seat of policy?
- How does the sector respond to rhetoric of this nature, and how does it affect the issues that its leaders need to face up to and the decisions they have to make?
- Does the 'driving seat' description help to clarify a fundamental purpose for the FE sector, or does it just lead the sector to an ideological perception of what FE ought to be?

The project sought to provide a space for leaders to reflect on shifts in the wider society and economy, and to explore the implications and challenges presented by these for leadership in a new world that must delicately balance the public and private sector in both delivery and policy considerations. The project did not test any predetermined hypothesis but sought to explore and bring out issues for future leadership and change emerging from leaders' perceptions after taking time to review evidence of the direction of travel of:

- a) the position of FE and skills within the wider world;
- b) the balancing of its relationships with employers and the state;
- c) the implications of (a) and (b) for sector leadership at organisational level, with a special focus on flagship policies such as apprenticeships.

Our objective was to reach a clear articulation of these factors, to aid public understanding of the contribution of technical and vocational skills to lives and the economy.

Methodology

This research used qualitative methods. A series of nine roundtable discussion groups took place around England from April to July 2018, each professionally facilitated. There was a range of participants at each roundtable from different sub-sectors of FE and skills, including learning providers, employers that train their employees using government-funded programmes, and non-provider stakeholders. This diversity of professional backgrounds, cultures and experience was an important aspect of the research design to promote clarity of articulation and collaborative possibilities, as well as enriching understandings from beyond each individual leader's immediate setting.

Invitations were sent to a wide range of sector leaders representing a variety of types of organisation. In total, 81 senior leaders from across the FE sector attended the nine roundtables which took place between April and July 2018 in:

1. Central London
2. East London
3. West London
4. Bath
5. Coventry
6. Nottingham
7. Leeds
8. Salford
9. Gateshead

Participants took part in the roundtables under the Chatham House Rule of confidentiality so are not named in this report. In total, there were 81 leaders from 80 different organisations: 41 were chief executives (including one recently retired), managing directors or chairs of boards of trustees; 20 were members of senior leadership teams; and 20 were senior managers with responsibility for learning and development. Of the 80 organisations, 32 operated nationally across England and the remainder were working regionally or locally. The

majority of learning providers were specialists in a range of related industrial sectors (e.g. transport and logistics, or business administration and finance).

Thirty-six organisations were independent training providers (ITPs), all delivering government-funded apprenticeships and a range of other provision, such as maths and English courses. The ITPs and other types of organisation were a mix of commercial, not-for-profit, public sector and third sector, including at least five charities. Many of these had secondary functions such as consultancy, recruitment and business service supply. One network of training organisations submitted an additional eight written responses from individual providers to key research questions.

Although most work-based learning provision in England is delivered by ITPs (including 75 per cent of all apprenticeships), and these were very well represented at the roundtables, FE colleges deliver to 80 per cent of learners in FE as a whole when all classroom-based participation is accounted for. General FE colleges were represented at roundtables by leaders from a national representative body, a college group and an individual college. To boost college representation, Bev Jones, co-leader of the Careers Colleges Trust and member of the project Steering Group, arranged for AELP researchers to collect additional data from eight more general FE colleges in July 2018. In addition to these were eight employers who train their own staff, including some of the largest employers in the country. This number was further boosted by three additional employers, which critically reviewed this report before it was finalised.

Further diversity in the types of organisation participating in the research came from the following: four awarding organisations; four FE sector service providers; three careers advice and guidance champions; and three FE sector consultants. Finally, there was one representative from each of the following:

an adult and community learning provider; a chamber of commerce; an FE sector body championing special educational needs; and the trade union community.

In advance of the roundtables, a stimulus paper (Warner and Gladding, 2018) was published and circulated, and structured topic guides were devised before each set of three roundtables. These guides built on and explored emerging themes of interest. Using an iterative research design, analysis of the data from the first three groups fed into stimulus material for the second, and likewise the third three groups. This combination of stimulus and guidance documents was intended to – and did – spark full and open debate at each roundtable about the role of FE and skills and the relative positioning of employers, providers and the state within the system.

Following the conclusion of the roundtables, the project team took time to collate and analyse the data, which were recorded in written and audio format at each event. A literature review was also undertaken to give context and background to the themes and thinking expressed. Drafts of the report were circulated to key individuals within AELP for comment, and critical reading was also invited from a small number of key sector stakeholders.

This report is therefore driven by an analysis of the data received from just over 100 participants, and its conclusions are based on the best interpretation of their collective views where this was possible. In some areas there was clear disagreement and no firm conclusions could be drawn, and this is clearly noted. In other areas again, the absence of substantial discussion on some themes made it impossible to draw conclusions, but where this happened some observations have been made which may help the reader to draw conclusions of their own.

Context of our findings

As already noted, we did not set out to test a hypothesis but to find out how sector leaders feel and think. There was, however, on reflection and perhaps unconsciously, a predisposition among the research group that we would see a difference in the perspective of sector leaders in ITPs, and sector leaders from the traditional college sector – that, for example, college leaders may have a more 'socially oriented' view of the role of skills and technical training in society, while ITPs leaders may have a more 'commercially oriented' view.

What surprised us when we came to review the evidence we had gathered was that when sector leaders were given the time to reflect, when they were given the space away from the day-to-day commercial pressures of their organisations to consider what they were doing and their underlying motivations, there was a significant degree of commonality in their responses that transcended the types of organisation they worked for. What those views were is what we will now discuss and explore – but bear in mind that, ultimately, our findings are reflective of a heterogeneous group of providers and organisations that, perhaps counter-intuitively, find themselves with a huge amount in common. This in itself is a point that policy-makers may wish to bear in mind when they consider rules and regulations that will deliberately affect different types of organisations in the skills sector in different ways.

SUMMARY

In *Chapter 1* of this report, 'Revving up – policy-makers ask employers to take the wheel', we briefly outline a history of the policy developments that have led us to the current FE system in England. We argue that the pace of change has accelerated recently and is now at a level at which a large part of the FE sector is becoming dominated or synonymous with the development of a skills development system to meet the needs of UK prosperity.

Chapter 2, 'Deciding on the destination – what is today's FE sector for?', revisits the argument that, at the national systemic level, FE is very loosely defined by what it is not, that is, everything that isn't schools or universities. In this research, the prime objectives of FE were clearly articulated by sector leaders as both social *and* economic. However, by creating a heavily regulated market, the state has manoeuvred providers into a situation where a wider societal purpose has been conflated with, and is treated as largely incidental to, the needs of employers and industry. At the same time, centralisation of the infrastructure of national bodies in FE means that opportunities for FE leaders to help shape policy and 'push back' on poor policy decisions have diminished. We argue that, despite sector leaders of all types of organisations expressing a belief in a wider, societal purpose to FE, this is not properly reflected in the current system, which more accurately resembles a targeted industrialised skills strategy (whether or not employers have asked for it or agree with it) and loses sight of this bigger picture. The state is firmly 'in the driving seat' of FE.

In *Chapter 3*, 'Who wants a lift? Why some employers accept, but most don't', we draw on sector leaders' experience and thinking

CHAPTER 1

about the current extent of employer involvement in FE. We develop the idea that those employers who choose to actively participate in the government's newly reformed flagship skills programme of apprenticeships are beginning to 'drive' aspects of FE in unprecedented ways – yet many others feel effectively excluded from participating in FE due to inaccessible funding or the content of training programmes being inappropriate for their particular business needs. Nearly all employers in one way or the other therefore remain highly reliant on providers to navigate the FE system for them when they decide to engage and attempt to draw benefit from it. It is clear to most employers that expertise in vocational education and training is not the core purpose or focus of their own businesses, and resides in training organisations, from where it is best accessed.

Chapter 4, 'Follow the satnav, or follow your instinct? How behaviours govern purpose', examines in what ways and the overall extent to which, despite strong influences from the state and employers, sector leaders' behaviours and practices continue to influence the purpose, direction and output of their individual organisations. Sector leaders feel that commercial imperatives have led them to acquiesce to this rebalancing of power towards the state more than many feel is desirable. We identify the new and vital roles leaders are playing in the skills development part of the FE system (or even the wider FE system now that the state has so closely aligned FE with skills development). Providers may not be 'driving' the FE system in the way that the state is, but they probably have to be 'riding shotgun' to make it work.

Chapter 5, 'Taking in the view – wider influences on FE leadership thinking', examines some of the wider influences on thinking that FE sector leaders experience, noting that, despite their breadth and scope, they are not felt to be unmanageable. The chapter explores the impact of technology in more detail, and in particular the relative diffidence of the sector leaders we talked to as to its strategic importance. Our conclusions are brought together in *Chapter 6, 'Are we there yet? Conclusions and recommendations'*.

Revving up – policy-makers ask employers to take the wheel

A quick history of technical education

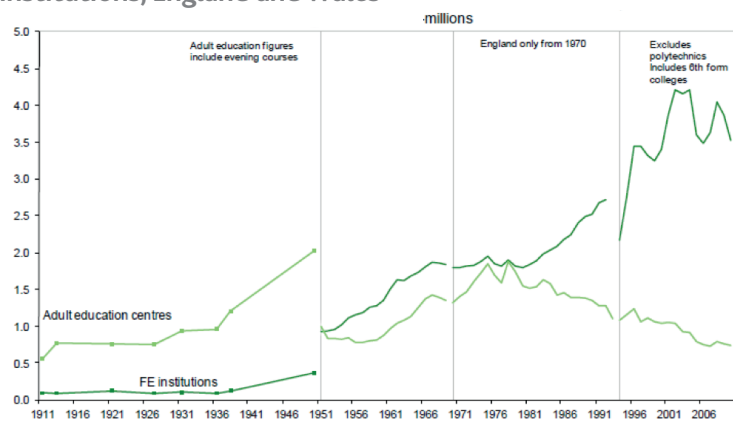
Until relatively recently, the involvement of employers in post-compulsory technical education provision in England has been conducted on a purely 'voluntarist' basis, with no compulsion either regulatory frameworks or legislation (Cuddy and Leney, 2005). FE has traditionally been seen as providing learning for personal interest and development, with vocational education and training for adults taking place in a variety of settings.

The state generally limits its funding of vocational learning to products that are in line with overall policy or that it, rather than employers, decides are relevant to employer needs. The fact that this only partially addresses the needs of industry, and that policy changes over time, has led to a relatively piecemeal mix of the contributions of engaged employers with government policy initiatives in what has become a fragmented and complex system (Ingold et al, 2017). Over 3 million learners undertake FE each year, a significant proportion of whom are in the lower socioeconomic groups and can struggle to overcome financial barriers to learning (Francis and Norris, 2014).

In the 1950s, apprenticeships were the main route into a job in most manufacturing industries, engineering and many construction occupations. Government intervention was minimal – apprentices were rarely aged more than 20 and would generally work for a firm for about three years before automatically becoming a full employee (Thompson et al., 2012). Through

the 1960s, any original aims of the secondary modern and polytechnic systems to provide technical education to young people centred on employer needs appeared to be faltering in the face of an upsurge in learner-centred 'progressive teaching' methods. From the late 1970s, the total numbers at adult education centres also began to fall away from a peak of 1.9 million to below 750,000 in 2010/11 (see *Figure 1*).

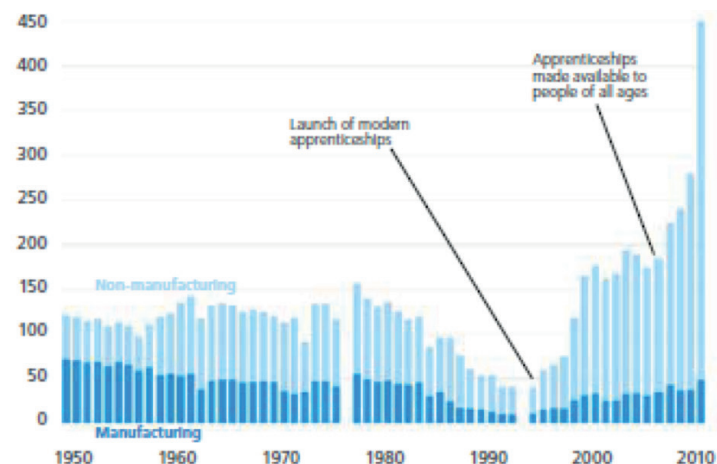
Figure 1: Learners at further education and adult education institutions, England and Wales



Source: Bolton (2012).

In the 1980s, apprenticeships experienced a steep fall in participation that was only arrested in the mid-1990s (see *Figure 2*).

Figure 2



Source: Thompson et al. (2012)

The government nonetheless believed that technical training still had an important part to play within society and the economy. Finding employers increasingly unwilling or unable to offer apprenticeship opportunities, it embarked on a process of reform that gave a level of autonomy to colleges from local authority control that it was thought might give them better responsiveness to local economic needs. Linked to this was the introduction of significant public funding programmes for FE and apprenticeships by the state, and a corresponding steady growth in uptake. It can be argued that the increasing levels of government subsidy towards such training may have at least played a part – if not the major part – in the growth and popularity of apprenticeships since that time, and possibly marked a point at which work-based training (as opposed to classroom-based technical training) began to be very deliberately incorporated into government policy.

However, since around 2005 the numbers of publicly funded learners in FE have once again been in a general decline (Hupkau and Ventura, 2017: 14). This is widely considered to be a symptom of the burgeoning expense being incurred and the desire of successive governments to contain this to one extent or another.

These fiscal pressures have also tended to narrow the range of provision offered (UK Parliament, 2018a: para 127); as politicians became increasingly concerned about strains on the public purse while seeking to avoid raising taxes, the government has appeared to limit the range of provision that can be funded by using its relevance to industrial need as an overriding criterion for inclusion. Professor Sir Alan Tuckett summarised the situation in evidence to the UK Select Committee on Economic Affairs when he said, 'It is not only funding; it is how we have constricted what we see the budgets doing' (UK Parliament, 2018a: para 127).

The basis of policy

Government policy towards technical education and training has in recent years been primarily based on a supply-push basis. By increasing the publicly-funded supply of qualified labour, it was believed that employers would adopt higher value-added, higher productivity, higher skill production strategies. However, the provision of training to employer staff at no (or little) cost, and with no requirement on them to contribute to the design or delivery of it either, this did not alter the tendency to concentrate on low value-added training and business strategies associated with low-skilled jobs, resulting in a situation of low skills equilibrium as indicated by the combination of relatively low wages but high employment which seems to have become increasingly common in some parts of the UK economy² (Hogarth and Wilson, 2003). There was, after all:

a thriving marketplace for goods and services sold on the basis of low cost and supported by low wages. This results in a substantial number of relatively lowly skilled jobs that offer only fairly limited opportunities for upgrading skills, growth and progression.

(Hogarth and Wilson, 2003)

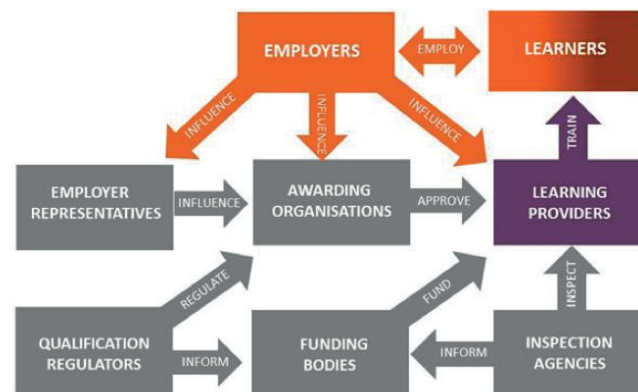
² It is interesting to note that since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy there has been a surge in the numbers of higher-level leadership and management standards being taken up. Whether this is because there was previously untapped (or under-tapped) demand, or whether it is just a manifestation of a route of least resistance to use up levy funds is open to question. Whatever the reason, it is too early just yet to say whether this has altered the low-skills equilibrium scenario posited above.

A supply-push strategy seemed to do little to alter this, and Huddleston and Laczik (2018) note that this piecemeal system resulted in:

a mixed picture of employer involvement ranging from significant to totally absent, often dependent on company size, sector, location, product market and Board members' predilections. Also, employers have been asked to engage in different ways and to meet multiple demands, for example to provide work experience places for young people, to mentor students, to host workplace visits.

There is considerable agreement that the technical/FE sector recognises the need to accommodate the input of employers and industry in the design of content, because it is they who utilise the skills of the individual to the ultimate benefit of both the community and the economy as a whole, yet employers have been reticent to engage on any scale at all. To try and address this, England has (almost organically) developed a complex picture of technical education provision in which employers are centrally enmeshed – at least in theory, as Figure 3 demonstrates.

Figure 3



Source: Adapted from British Council (2015)

There is criticism however that the interests of smaller employers are often overlooked in the design and implementation of technical education policies because of the current complexity of interlinking relationships, and the resources required to ensure their input is meaningful and influential. This is particularly evident in the operation of apprenticeship trailblazers, new employer-led groups that are responsible for devising apprenticeship standards in line with the needs of each occupation. These criticisms could come down to the way that policy is being implemented, rather than it being an unavoidable and intrinsic part of the process – one employer representative told us that ‘the underlying principle of (apprenticeship ‘trailblazers’) is excellent, but the execution is unnecessarily complex and convoluted’ – but independent research certainly shows a general correlation between size of organisation and the likelihood of its engagement in the technical education system, indicating that the interests of smaller employers in the design of technical education are not well-served by the system itself (Dawson et al., 2012). Evidence to the Select Committee on the development of apprenticeship standards also stated that:

Large businesses have dominated the development of many of the new standards ... This may in part be due to the time commitment involved. The Association of Accounting Technicians reported that their representative had had to attend half-day meetings weekly over a two month period, which they describe as ‘simply not practical for someone in a small accountancy firm’ ... [Trailblazers] are relatively small groups of employers with little true SME [small to medium size enterprise] representation given that the majority of apprenticeship employers in the [building services engineering] sector are SMEs and often even micro businesses.

(HM Government, 2015a: Ch 5)

Figure 3 confirms the belief among sector leaders that FE has multiple ‘customers’. This is celebrated by many but certainly

does not help to focus expertise on any particular area of need. That said, there is general agreement that current policy for the FE system as a whole prioritises the needs of the economy and industry more strongly than it used to. The deliberateness of this policy feels new to many, yet there are numerous references going back hundreds of years to employers bemoaning the levels of education that their potential recruits were displaying to them, and of policy trying to address this issue. It is certainly the case, particularly in the twentieth century, that much English education policy was predicated on a desire to better serve industry needs as opposed to those of the individual, though whether it ever succeeded in this at any stage is much more debatable. Even the predominance of grammar schools over secondary moderns can, at least in part, be attributed to views such as those expressed by the Federation of British Industries in 1951 that employers preferred an increased number of grammar-school leavers – more likely, in their view, to supply ‘the right type of boy’ – rather than helping to strengthen occupationally related curricula in other schools (Richardson and Wiborg, 2010).

The issue that many of our project roundtables circled around was to what extent the concept of ‘education for industry’ has spread throughout the various branches of the FE sector (due to policy and targeted constriction of funding) and, indeed, whether ‘technical education’ and ‘FE’ can or should be conflated. The current government is very clear about the primary purpose of FE on its webpage: ‘The government aims to make sure that further education provides the skilled workforce employers need and helps individuals reach their full potential’ (HM Government, 2018), although it is equally careful elsewhere not to say that this is all it is for. Schools minister Nick Gibb for example, addressing the Education Reform Summit in 2015, was at pains to highlight a wider remit for education as a whole – to empower young people to succeed in the economy, participate in culture and prepare for adult life (HM Government, 2015b).

HM Government's 'Dual Mandate' consultation (Dept for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2015) argued that FE served two purposes simultaneously:

- a) To provide vocational education for the workplace with a focus on higher-level professional and technical skills;
- b) To provide second chances for those who have not succeeded in the school system.

The consultation however argued that colleges were originally designed as civic enterprises by businesses and local authorities, teaching skills demanded by employers, and that this therefore remained the essential purpose of FE. The consultation was clear that there had been an 'erosion' of the first part of the mandate and it was this that required the most attention, and overall it also made clear that the 'second chance' being referred to in the second part of the mandate was primarily a second chance to meet employer needs and thus reinforce prospects of work and progression. Whether this therefore really constitutes a 'dual mandate', or merely describes two aspects of one mandate, is debatable. The difficulty now is knowing whether, or to what extent, this view (or any other) of a dual mandate underpins current government policy, as no response to the consultation has ever been published.

Certainly, the reforms to the FE and skills system – and in particular the introduction of the apprenticeship levy – have been couched in terms indicating that their primary concern is meeting the needs of the economy and industry rather than the deficiencies of the individual, with the implication that these secondary needs would be met by achieving the prime purpose. The Richard Review (Richard, 2012) predates the Dual Mandate consultation but underpins most if not all of the current apprenticeship reforms, and it is clear that, at the time of its writing, it felt that what were perceived as unsatisfactory levels of technical education (in terms of relevance to employer needs) had much to do with an undue influence of the supply side imposing their training wares on employers whether or not

they were needed or relevant. It declared that apprenticeships had become 'a government-led training programme, shaped by training professionals not employers ... training providers, public and private [should] respond first and foremost to the employer's needs; something that is not always in evidence today'. It went on:

... some employers feel that they are only presented with a limited menu of options ... and have little perceived scope to negotiate anything additional despite, in principle, having access to a wide choice of frameworks ... Stakeholders were critical of the current provider-led system, observing that some providers have a tendency to deliver frameworks that are 'easy to deliver', profitable and can attract large numbers, rather than delivering what industry wants or needs.

(Richard, 2012: 84–85)

In other words, the system had, over time, designed itself in such a way that employers were beholden and limited to what providers could offer them, or (worse) what they were prepared to offer. The solution, according to Richard, was clear:

[The current system] is too provider-driven and not sufficiently responsive to employers, and ... does not promote efficiency or adequately incentivise quality. A future system needs to put employers in the lead, maximise value for money, and encourage expansion.

(Richard, 2012: 107)

While criticism that the system was too supply-driven was not new (Wolf, 2011), the Richard Review was very influential in that it focused attention on a strand of technical education which had high visibility among the public at large – apprenticeships – and thus had political capital. The government's response to Doug Richard (Dept for Education, 2013) amounted to an endorsement of this general view that supply-side influence was too prevalent.

This view seemed reinforced by the Implementation Plan published later the same year which detailed the first eight new 'Trailblazer' groups to develop apprenticeship standards, none of which included training providers in their composition (HM Government, 2013b; Section 3).³ Indeed, the government press release (Dept for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2013) detailing this innovation said, 'Under the reforms, **employers will be put in the driving seat** to create new apprenticeship standards that will deliver the skills businesses and learners need to compete in the global race', implying that they had not been there before. It is hardly surprising therefore that, given the profile of the reforms, this narrative of employers in the driving seat took hold, but our research indicates that it is at best debatable whether employers in the driving seat is a very accurate reflection of how the FE system goes about its business. In various ways, we came across repeated descriptions of a process relationship between employers and providers that varies only slightly from one policy iteration to the next, with only limited, if any, effect on the increased appropriateness of the output to employer needs. The changes also appear to have only at best a small incremental effect on wider social learning needs, perhaps because the learner voice in the design and purpose of FE is noticeably absent.

Most businesses will, of course, only engage in government programmes if they are convinced this will help them to achieve a business objective (such as to fill vacancies, improve workforce skills or improve productivity) and provide a return on investment. Those that do engage with the system therefore do so willingly and with a clear purpose or objective in mind – but this is different from saying that such engagement constitutes their being in a leading position of influence. Reductions in

non-employer specific skills budgets such as the Adult Education Budget (AEB) may tend to imply that it is employer-specific outputs that are now being prioritised, but when the policy of what is being funded is examined it is found that policy decisions as to where budgets are to be spent are rarely if ever taken with significant employer involvement – only decisions on how to implement the policy choices that have already been made. As one sector leader put it:

A driver usually owns the vehicle or at least works for someone who does. That's not the case here. The employer is driving a car they don't own to a place that the state is telling them they need to go.

The feeling of those we spoke to for this research is that the current government is nevertheless continuing to shift the balance of what FE is for towards the skills needs of employment and industry. However, the notion that the targeted outputs are defined by an aggregation of employers and sectors, giving rise to a concept of 'employers in the driving seat', met with considerable scepticism from FE sector leaders. Ultimately, sector leaders believe it is the state, not the employers, that is defining what the learning output should be; a choice that is governed by policy and ideology at least as much as (and most likely more than) it is about the self-defined needs of either employers or learners.

³ This policy appears to have since been acknowledged as a mistake, as the vast majority of trailblazers established since this time have proactively included providers and other supply-side stakeholders who are able to contribute to the design of standards – not least through being able to comment on their deliverability and viability, both of which have proven to be issues with many of the first standards that were published. It is also interesting that despite following many of its other recommendations, policy did not initially pick up on the earlier suggestion of the Skills Commission that 'qualification and curriculum development should be driven by *awarding bodies, learners, teachers and employers* – a distributed design process directed by those who are using and paying for the qualification and training' (Skills Commission, 2011: 12, authors' emphasis).

CHAPTER 2

Deciding on the destination – what is today’s FE sector for?

In 2013, the Prime Minister was using the phrase ‘employers in the driving seat’ to describe the thrust of proposed apprenticeship reforms (HM Government, 2013a). Nevertheless, analysis of the data collected at the roundtables shows sector leaders consistently describing the current reforms as simply a variation on a theme – the employer has a skills problem, the state provides the money and a product, the provider uses the latter to resolve the former. The current reforms to the apprenticeship system have certainly strengthened the employer voice in the design of standards, but they still ultimately have to be approved by the state, which will do so with its own policy objectives to the front and centre of its thinking.

Overall, therefore, the sector leaders that we talked to feel that employers are no more in the driving seat now than they ever were, although there is more opportunity for them to outline a set of self-defined needs (even if these are ultimately amended or ignored). What has really happened is that the state’s need for the FE system to deliver an industrialised skills strategy has altered the way it presents the argument about why the status quo is perceived to be malfunctioning, who is responsible and what should change to remediate the situation, without (to date at least) showing much sign that the outputs of the system will be markedly different and better. That nothing much has changed is evidenced for example by the fact that the system has not so far coped very well with the rise of ‘multi-layered’ delivery models in FE, where an actor performs some form of combination of

roles (such as employer provider, or where an organisation both subcontracts its own work out while simultaneously delivering subcontracts to other lead providers). But if it is felt that nothing much has changed, then what (if anything) do sector leaders feel should?

At the moment, FE is usually defined by what it is *not* – loosely, it could be described as 'not the compulsory schooling phase, not universities, but any learning that isn't either of those'. Hupkau and Ventura (2017) attempted a more bounded definition – that 'Further Education ... broadly refers to all learning delivered after the age of 16, with the exception of Higher Education courses' – but in explaining in more granular detail what this meant, they outlined such a vast range of institutions and cohorts that it was not ultimately helpful in discerning or articulating a firm collective purpose. This illustrates well the central dilemma our roundtable attendees faced when asked to articulate their purpose and customer base – providing they stayed within the bounds of what FE *isn't*, then it could be almost anything they wanted.

On discussing notions of purpose in (non-academic) FE, our roundtable attendees did not agree as to whether this broad sector even *needed* to more clearly collectively identify and articulate a common overarching purpose and simply defined customer base than it does now. Some certainly felt that the inherent 'messiness' of the system, where the purposes are multiple so sometimes seem unclear, not only defines the role and purpose of providers but also gives them some strength. However, among those believing that clearer purpose and definition were still needed, there were mixed views as to whether they should first identify and articulate a purpose which in turn would clearly identify the customer; or whether it is the identification of the customer that would give the sense of purpose.

In essence, the roundtable discussions only evidenced that most leaders agree that it currently lacks a clear identity, but they have mixed views on whether this is an overall positive or negative –

some even felt that time discussing the basis of FE distracted the otherwise more enterprising among them from just getting on and delivering useful learning to whoever needed it. As already mentioned, there was, however, discussion as to whether this uncertainty has contributed to a situation where technical education as defined by employer need has now emerged with such prominence as to fill a void, verging on becoming the FE system's whole *raison d'être*. Indeed, it could be argued that the dominance of employer need is now clearly influencing the shape of academic (university) delivery as well.

Many sector leaders felt that governments make the most of this uncertainty about purpose and mission to push their own priorities, a view echoed by Professor Martin Doel (2018), who said of FE:

[There is] a requirement to do everything, which then gives it no sense of owning anything, which means new ministers come in feeling they can change the programme without it being noticed or being remarked upon or having a strong constituency to stick up for it. So, institutions in the sector are driven by outside policy changes and have little agency to determine those changes themselves, and that's a concern going forward.

This compounded a feeling among many that the supply side has been held accountable for problems which are not of its making, and that in fact often stem from a general uncertainty of purpose within a complex and fractured system – this in spite of the fact that there remains a strong undercurrent of feeling among sector leaders that it should at least contain a separate, wider and more individual-oriented purpose. For example, some felt that supporting individual learner aspirations should be the overall primary aim of FE, while others felt that some sectors of industry (such as hair and beauty) had successfully blended an industrialised skills strategy with such wider life skills already.

We examined the question in several different ways – for example, by asking attendees to create and explain their own graphic of the major 'players' or influencers deciding the purpose(s) and therefore nature of the FE system, and to discuss the related question of who they felt their 'customers' were – individual learners, employers, the state, etc. The only conclusion that can be drawn from these discussions, in whatever way we framed them, was providers are not uniformly sure whereabouts they sit in the system, nor could they clearly articulate which master it is supposed to be serving. Leaders' graphical representations of the FE system usually had some commonality of the learner at the centre. The three main influencers on FE – employers, state and providers – tended to be shown as in an unequal relationship to each other, as indicated by different thicknesses of arrows going in different directions.

What these arrows represented could vary quite dramatically from delegate to delegate, and it became clear that there are real benefits in trying to better understand the flows (the relationships) between the players. As an attendee at the very first roundtable succinctly put it: 'The answers are not in the boxes. They're in the arrows.'

Ultimately, sector leaders feel it is really the relationships between the players rather than the labels or roles designated to each player that are most important in the functionality of the system. These do not however generally effect a change in the output, a change which is reliant on products that do not currently sufficiently talk to the more general learning needs in the population which, if addressed, would do much to incidentally reinforce the skills needs of industry. The question is, should the FE system be trying to cover both bases, or would it benefit from a clearer focus on one or the other?

The role of the provider

When we began to unpick what the provider roles are, there was significant agreement. There is, of course, the provision of training itself. Alongside this, however, was a 'guiding' role – as another sector leader put it, 'employers do not necessarily want to be in the driving seat, but what they do want is a trusted advisor' to advise and guide them on a journey through a highly regulated and complex field that is not their specialism. Providers see themselves as serving this purpose, using the term 'market mediation' to describe their organisation's main role – guiding, interpreting, explaining and negotiating the policy and rules created by the state to employers. To be a successful market mediator is to have the skilled workforce to not only engage an

It was felt that providers have always had the knowledge and expertise to deliver government-funded learning and skills programmes employer in the training market but also to guide what they do there. It was felt that providers have always had the knowledge and expertise to deliver government-funded learning and skills programmes, but,

interestingly, the push toward employers in the driving seat actually raises the importance of this relationship (Ingold, 2018) rather than relegating the role of the provider behind that of the employer – exactly what the current suite of reforms was trying to avoid. This would tend to confirm the earlier view that 'these relationships will constantly try to reassert themselves over whatever arbitrary system happens to currently be in place'.

Another interpretation is that, at this moment in time, when radical apprenticeship reforms are still bedding in, providers are in an *interim* role of 'skilling up' employers in the workings and delivery of this government-funded staff development and recruitment programme until employers have the knowledge in-house. The logical long-term consequence of this scenario is that training provider organisations ultimately put themselves out of business,

so the rise of employer-providers can and should give serious pause for thought as to their future business strategies. Solace can be taken by training providers, however, from the sheer size of any new and wider definition of the FE system, which includes hundreds of thousands of employers doing government-funded training – it will take many years to engage and upskill employer organisations, and even then many in-house employer-based learning and development jobs may become available long term.

The leaders that we talked to said that market mediation was exactly the role that they should, and do, fulfil. This was to some extent evidenced by the Evaluation of the Employer Ownership Pilots (EOPs) run by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills between 2012 and 2016 (UKCES, 2016) where employers took the lead in defining and running skills provision. It reported difficulties because 'businesses do not automatically collaborate on skills and [take] time to establish a common focus'. It noted that only with 'central coordination' were competitors able to find common ground on which to work together. It has to be said that the coordination being referred to in the EOP is most likely envisaged as that of an overarching central government role as opposed to the relationships between employers and providers, but the principle still holds true. It is this coordination role – lacking in the pilots but present in the FE system generally – which providers undertake.

The current role for providers includes 'selling' government-funded training – as far back as 2010, Ofsted was saying that 'employers' engagement in education and training is generally stimulated by those who supply it' (Huddleston and Laczik, 2018: 273) – so it is providers that stimulate the demand that the state is now presenting as 'employers being in the driving seat'. Sector leaders feel that this will probably always continue to be the case because it is the inherent nature of the relationship.

Most sector leaders we talked to tended to agree that fundamentally the supply side remains in a very strong position in terms of its role, but for a variety of reasons lacks the means, capacity and perhaps the confidence to express it coherently, at a joined-up, sector-wide level. Doing so might help to bound an overall meaningful purpose of FE. What seems to be happening instead is that given an unclear purpose, multiple customers, poor implementation of increasingly tough procurement and funding rules, and what are often felt to be disproportionate responses by government to policy issues and challenges, and given poor implementation of increasingly tough procurement and funding rules, the sector just builds new narratives to describe the status quo, where the outputs themselves do not really change.

What's the objective?

Sector leaders during our research believed that even though there are multiple customers in FE, the sector could collectively deliver advantages to all, if the supply side was given room to specialise in what they can do best. General FE colleges, for example, are considered by the sector to be the state's 'provider arm'⁴ with an average of 80 per cent of their income coming from government departments (Association of Colleges, *nd*). This leaves them subject to strong pressure from government to deliver whatever the latest initiative or priority is, almost regardless of whether or not they are well placed to do so. One roundtable attendee commented that colleges have 'tried too much to be all things to all people' while another (non-college) senior leader said that they 'feel sorry for general FE colleges because they can't do everything for everybody but keep trying.'

For their part, independent providers felt that the funding priority given to particular strands of provision at various times – e.g. apprenticeships, traineeships, T-levels – is what can often force them to deliver outputs to which they may not be operationally

⁴ Notwithstanding the fact that they have been given some autonomy in governance and are, when it is convenient to do so, sometimes described by government as being in the private sector.

best suited. Indeed, leaders of ITPs at our roundtables were clear that 'just surviving' was now almost an aim in itself – as one attendee put it, 'if you want to exist as a training provider, you have to play the state's game'. This gives rise to an uncomfortable truth for many commentators – for the FE sector to thrive, training providers need to be profitable. Even charities, colleges and not-for-profit providers need to make operating surpluses, so it cannot be argued that in itself profit or surplus is an undesirable side-effect of the system, because it is vital if the infrastructure is to operate at all. If the system has become so tightly regulated as to make the generation of operating surpluses difficult, then 'just surviving' takes on an ill-deserved primacy in business strategy, one that does not define or serve a wider purpose for FE beyond that of the individual organisation. Having multiple customers within the system is felt to be manageable, but only if individual providers can viably deliver in line with their strongest competencies.

The wider notion that something of the provider base needs to survive in order for the FE system to function at all eventually circles back to the central point – what is the system here to do? The state, it is felt, is conceptually interested in providing learning on a general level but is conflating this with the need for productivity using political initiatives in the form of streams of provision (the 'products', such as apprenticeships, traineeships, T-levels, etc.). It is therefore losing sight of properly servicing a wider purpose for FE that moves beyond this. This view, some roundtables felt, is evidenced by the fact that the FE system almost ignores the role of non-state-funded players in the delivery of technical skills and learning – even though, if they are delivering any form of skills or learning at all, they must therefore be contributing something to the sum total of overall knowledge, and therefore (using the state perspective) productivity and economic prosperity. As far as the FE sector goes, the state is only interested in what it does itself. Indeed, by not taking enough interest in the commercial sector, it could be argued that that the state is falling foul of deadweight by funding some provision

which would otherwise be covered through commercial full-cost recovery means, such as management apprenticeships under the levy, while restricting funding for entry-level provision for young people that would otherwise have little commercial attraction.

This focus on what the state provides, and the lack of focus on the commercial market's contribution to learning and skills, led to a point not very many years ago, it was felt, where the upturn in the profile of apprenticeships had to mean a slight tempering of expectations – apprenticeships would not in themselves solve youth unemployment, but the way they were presented in the late 1990s in particular meant it often seemed like they could or would. This was a relatively easy narrative to take hold with the public because apprenticeships have profile, a history, and very clear beneficiaries – a learner gets learning and an employer gets training dedicated to their needs, the training costs of which were mostly met by the state.⁵ It is far less easy to frame this narrative within provision such as study programmes or traineeships, where the learner may benefit in a general sense, but it is often hard to discern a quantifiable benefit for any individual employer. There is no real history to look back on to give a frame of reference as to what this provision was intended to achieve, and, moreover, little commercial imperative on the part of employers to offer it.⁶

The increasing dominance of apprenticeships – the government itself says they are the 'flagship' skills policy – is taking place while T-levels are being developed as an entirely new option for (mainly) young people to learn about and gain work experience in an occupational area. The government rhetoric around T-levels is quickly establishing a narrative of directly targeting the needs of an individual occupation, but seems to take little heed of the argument that advocating career specialisation at an early age may not always be the wisest option or what employers are

⁵ The *total* cost of an apprenticeship is not now entirely met by the state – only those costs relating to the training itself. Employers are responsible for salaries, internal overheads, equipment and so forth.

⁶ It is certainly possible that the directness of the relationship between apprentice-employees and businesses helps explain the decreasing profile of the similar but non-employed programme of traineeships in government strategies.

necessarily looking for (see Cosslett, 2014, who argues that, at 16, 'You drop the subjects for which you have the least enthusiasm or which seem the least useful to you at that moment, and then have plenty of time to regret it later'). There is also the possibility of 'digital sweatshops' where workers are exploited for very low wages, as envisioned by Johns et al (2011). Indeed, the whole rationale of T-levels – their purpose, who would do them and why – was the subject of considerable debate and led many sector leaders to the belief that T-levels are only skewing the argument once again towards policy and product, not necessarily need.

The roundtables could broadly agree that the system was piecemeal, and had grown organically rather than by design, leaving a fractured and complex 'organogram' that appeared to defy radical overhaul because of the sheer scale of the task that it would involve – 'you wouldn't start from here' was a typical comment. Nevertheless, there was a general feeling that providers understand and can work with ambiguity and 'messiness' very well – they must have this skill-set to survive within the system at all. Sector leaders at the second London roundtable thought that these skills could just as easily be turned to delivering holistic overall outputs in FE, as they currently are to ensuring organisational survival through compliance with government priorities.

How the state views the system

Our research indicates a feeling among providers that their skillset is not generally turned to producing a holistic output because of market over-management and over-regulation, and through a relative lack of sector leadership over time (when compared to, e.g. the university sector, which undoubtedly has held significant educational and political clout with every government). This state-heavy approach reflects the government's perception of crises and problems viewed through the prism of its own priorities. The FE system never quite meets the problems it is set because it is increasingly inclined to address

the needs of only one set of actors (currently, employers), yet only partially meets even those needs. The solutions (the provision or products) that the government offers to fund are based on overall ideological priorities rather than the identified needs of businesses or individuals generally. The state builds a narrative – 'employers in the driving seat' – which gives a focus that says the system will allow employers to design what they need and then fund it for them, when in reality it only allows employers to design and fund outputs that align precisely with what the state thinks they should design and fund.

The rise in development and recruitment of degree apprentices in terms of market share, set against the decreasing proportions of lower-level apprenticeships (House of Commons Library, 2018: 7) may be a symptom of this – of relatively 'easy' levy spending on older and higher-level apprentices with a higher return on investment, which chimes better with the state's industrial strategy. The insistence on the rule that maths and English qualifications within apprenticeship standards must be taken to a minimum of Level 2 (but not necessarily passed), is another example where the state has imposed its policy will on the process regardless of whether employers agree they need it or not.

One sector leader commented that because governments tend to reform in response to problems or crises, so in FE too they are always setting up a new state of affairs, never allowing the managed market to mature and keeping it in a constant state of mild panic that it is not functioning correctly at any given time. The decisions of sector leaders are therefore being constrained by the funding they receive, and the products that funding is limited to supporting, which has in the sector itself over time drifted into a general loss of focus on a wider sense of mission and purpose. This becomes self-perpetuating as thinking and decisions increasingly reinforce this situation rather than challenge it.

The roundtables generally agreed that whether or not employers were actually in the driving seat in the system, the government believed that their *needs* should be, and that policy was being formulated on that basis. Indeed, it was felt that employers were receiving some dispensations within the FE system that were not being made available to providers more generally, such as the ability to use the term 'apprenticeships' to describe training schemes that do not attract government apprenticeship training funding, whereas the providers of this training cannot do so. This compounded a feeling within the sector that it has been held to blame for a perceived unsatisfactory state of the system, when even the government's own evidence often raises doubt as to whether it is as unsatisfactory as it fears (Dept for Business Innovation & Skills 2014; and summarised by AELP, 2014)

More alarming for roundtable attendees was a realisation that perhaps, over time, they had not been effective enough in countering this view. There was certainly a strong feeling that sector leaders now generally act in a way that minimises risk and optimises regulatory compliance in order to 'just survive' – which is not an adverse consequence as such, but which can be said neither to drive and develop policy nor make for a particularly proactive, innovatory and responsive system. There was certainly a strong sense of risk aversion among providers at the roundtables, which can inhibit the potential outcomes of decision-making. In one form or another, several also alluded to a 'victim mentality' among the provider base – that they were being unfairly blamed for deficiencies in a highly complicated system yet were often too willing to accept this position instead of pushing back against it, because the market was too risky and uncertain to do otherwise.

This often led to a call from respondents for employers to do more to publicly express the importance of the provider's role, because, with employers nominally in the driving seat, it is the employer's voice that is heard, not that of the provider. This is of course both an expression of the weakness of the provider

position (because providers are having to get a third party to articulate their role for them), but also an indicator of its potential strength. If employers *need* providers to do any of this activity, and employers recognise this fact, then the corollary is that if providers were not around, then nothing much would happen – government policy would not be delivered, and employer training needs would not be met. Many felt that the provider role is to crystallise and articulate the training and skills needs of an employer in a suitable way to facilitate viable and effective delivery of a solution. This is important because many (if not most) providers felt that many (if not most) employers need providers to identify the boundaries of the problem they themselves lack the resources or expertise to resolve. Supporting this view, one employer representative told us that 'employers are interested in the outputs of the system. Training providers provide the "magic" that converts learners into valuable talent'.

Employers are interested in the outputs of the system. Training providers provide the 'magic' that converts learners into valuable talent

Providers are in a strong position and sector leaders need to recognise and communicate this. One delegate in Gateshead complained that an employer-led agenda 'combines an

arrogance and ignorance of the provider role'. While the context of this comment was external (and often mistaken) presumptions about what providers do or do not do, on reflection an increased 'arrogance' among providers may be a description of what is needed for the supply side to assert its role more effectively. What alarmed many roundtable attendees was a realisation that, perhaps, over time, they had not been effective enough in promoting what they do well. Almost all thought that they could do more with their 'magic' abilities if the state spent less time promoting one player above another and instead looked at what the relationships between the players could achieve.

Fundamentally, the worry among sector leaders is that if employers are given the primary role in setting the bounds of technical training, what happens to those outside the scope of

CHAPTER 3

those employer-based opportunities in the here and now? The fear is that they are being increasingly devalued and ignored by the technical training system – but the belief is clearly that, given a change in emphasis in how the system views the players within it, this can be addressed.

It was very clear that despite the rhetoric, very few in the sector believe that the current reforms either address employer need particularly well, or help social mobility. The latter view was put forward by AELP Chief Executive Mark Dawe at the 2018 Conservative Party conference when he said that the government are:

... great advocates of social mobility but what have they actually done over the past year to right the wrongs of policies that are currently working against social mobility?

He pushed back against the direction of travel set by the government, saying that its actions are not the right ones, citing:

decimated numbers in lower-level apprenticeships particularly for young people and in SMEs; an appalling resit policy, and a negative onslaught on quality by the Institute for Apprenticeships driving down prices and quality with it.

(AELP, 2018)

His conclusion that this is 'a fundamental issue needing resolution for the nation' chimes with the feelings of sector leaders – that the current aims of the technical training sector are being bounded in such a way that the interests of many individuals are being increasingly excluded, and that this is working to the benefit of no one.

Who wants a lift? Why some employers accept but most don't

In this chapter we analyse FE leaders' direct experiences of and thinking about the extent of employer involvement in FE. We develop the idea that those employers who choose to actively participate in the government's newly reformed flagship skills programme of apprenticeships are beginning to 'drive' aspects of FE in unprecedented ways.

There was unanimous agreement across the roundtables conducted for this research that, in general, while employers may know their desired destination they are highly reliant on providers to navigate the FE system to get them there. In addition, many employers are effectively excluded from participating in FE due to inaccessible funding or the content of training programmes being inappropriate for their particular business needs. Few employers were reported by sector leaders at our roundtables to want to be in the driving seat itself, on the basis that vocational education and training is not the core purpose and therefore focus of their businesses; they realise that expertise lies in training providers and (as in other areas of business) they choose partners with whom they can collaborate to deliver to their requirements.⁷

The current extent of employer involvement in apprenticeships

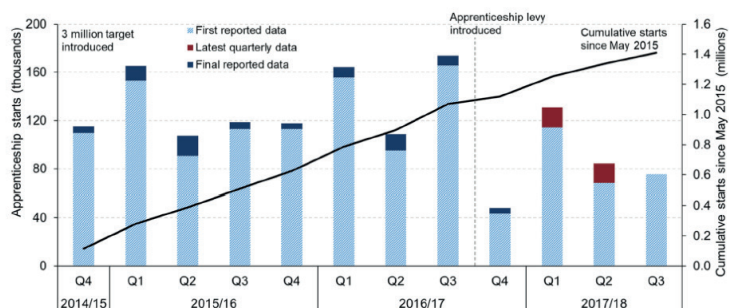
One measure of the extent of highly involved employers could be said to be the number and work of employer-providers – companies that take the lead in accessing government funding,

⁷ Whether employers themselves would collectively agree with this may be an issue worth further research.

and training their employee apprentices in-house. Currently, there are 262 employer-providers on the government's Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers (RoATP or the 'Register') eligible to apply for government funding to deliver apprenticeships (Dept for Education, 2018a). This is just over 10 per cent of the total 2,586 organisations on the Register, a modest proportion of all apprenticeship providers, but a fourfold increase in the last two years, although not all on the Register actually deliver.

Another measure of participation by employers is the number of apprenticeships that the government's digital service reports that employers have committed to. As of July 2018, 15 months after the apprenticeships levy was first introduced for all companies in England with a paybill of over £3 million, only 14,800 apprenticeship service accounts had been registered,⁸ and between them had made 198,100 'commitments' to starting apprentices (Dept for Education, 2018b). This represents a sharp drop in levels of engagement from prior to the introduction of the levy, as is evidenced in *Figure 4*, showing quarterly starts in apprenticeships both before and after the introduction of the levy at the end of Quarter 3 in 2017.

Figure 4



Source: Dept for Education (2018b: 3)

This massive drop has generated much concern and debate in the sector and has grabbed the headlines in the FE and trade sector press – but not generally in the mainstream mass media. It has

⁸ In simple terms, one registration can be seen as an individual employer.

therefore not attracted the public and political consciousness as something needing urgent attention.

A third and equally useful indicator comes from the widespread reporting by FE providers of an intensification of employer engagement activity. Our respondents tended to broadly agree that the percentage of employer-providers will continue to rise in the short term, before slowing to a steady state (unless policy levers are changed again). While some employer-providers have thrived, others have found it difficult to sustain high-quality provision. Roundtable participants said some employer-providers are now 'going cold' on the concept, realising how tricky it all is, and are beginning to formulate partnership models with external lead providers instead. Lessons are being learned from the likes of Next and Jaguar Land Rover, just two examples of companies which entered the apprenticeship market but quite soon exited it again when they got a Grade 4 'inadequate' Ofsted inspection result. Our respondents therefore felt, from their intensive employer engagement activity, that there is a big difference in the number of employer-providers on the Register and the number actually intending to deliver apprenticeships as the lead provider, so any claims that many employers wish to take this route are in their view misleading.

The above evidence shows great activity by the state and providers, yet lower than expected numbers of employers taking up their offer. Following the driving seat analogy, only a minority of employers are accepting a lift in the government/providers' car. The rest of this chapter explores the reasons why this might be.

Where is the demand?

The overall theme emerging from our discussions with sector leaders was a strong feeling the even though the majority of apprenticeship demand is from SMEs, policy is based on large employers. This differentiation manifests in a number of ways.

The sector leaders we talked to reported the emergence of two distinct types of conversation about apprenticeships between providers and employers: the first (particularly prevalent with SME employers) is 'how to use apprenticeships to build a skills base'; the second is with larger levy-paying providers, where in many cases the conversation can more often be founded on 'how to spend your levy'. This is a generalisation of course – it is difficult to ascertain whether or to what extent this is really the way larger employers view the levy system, or whether it is a narrative that providers have developed which they feel will best engage employers' attention, notwithstanding the employers' primary motivation.

It is very clear, however, that government policy and funding focuses on large employers who are able to contribute to a levy pot of funding, and who, therefore, have first call on the proceeds. According to a Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) survey of 1,000 business leaders and HR managers in June and July 2017, 'organisations who report that they have to pay the apprenticeship levy are much more likely to offer official apprenticeships than those who do not, figures of 72% and 17% respectively' (CIPD, 2018). On the face of it, this might support the objective of government policy – to increase engagement of employers in apprenticeships – but it does not equate with the numbers of companies that are actually offering apprenticeship opportunities at the moment.⁹

At its worst, sector leaders consistently report that, in their experience, for many large employers the levy is not a direct purchase of training; rather it is about 'cash recovery set-up' for money lost as tax, as these quotes from our roundtables demonstrate:

Employers don't want the hassle of contracts and larger employers are primarily concerned with spending behaviour, seeing the levy as a tax that they want back.

⁹ Indeed, a parliamentary written answer from the Treasury elicited that 'the number of businesses paying the apprenticeship levy is not available' (UK Parliament, 2018c) so making judgements about the levels of overall employer engagement with the levy is actually proving more difficult than anticipated.

[Large] employers are seeing the levy as a tax so will just pay it as that.

Employers ... will write [the levy] off as tax if they can't see the RoI [return on investment].

This adds to the frustration for many on the supply side, which has also seen SME engagement drop post-levy even though they have historically provided the bulk of demand for apprenticeships, comprising 99 per cent of the 5.7 million businesses in the UK (UK Parliament, 2017). In general, our roundtables agreed that SMEs often *want* to engage with government-funded skills programmes precisely because they need external support to stimulate growth and increase productivity, or because they are in low-margin, low-profit sectors with little or no budget for learning and staff development. Nevertheless, the levy reforms have led to a *decrease* in their engagement.

There are several reasons being put forward for this, ranging from demographics (the combination of a smaller number of 18 year olds in the population compounded by an increasing demand for them from levied employers), the structural constraints on delivery (such as off-the-job training requirements), availability of finance (where SMEs are required to contribute 10 per cent of the cost) or a perception that SME interests were poorly represented in the design of apprenticeship standards. According to sector leaders that we talked to in this research, those SMEs that are engaging often find it hard from a business perspective, but have senior leaders who feel strongly enough about wanting to 'give something back' to overcome such issues and help to nurture the next generation of their sector's workforce. This is supported by research from FSB (2016a) which found that 61 per cent of businesses recruited an apprentice because they were committed to giving young people training opportunities. These SMEs are making decisions to take apprentices that are, therefore, not primarily financial but are aligned to the sort of wider leadership of their sector that our respondents felt is increasingly being overlooked by the general thrust of an industrialised skills strategy.

There was strong insight from our respondents about how this has come about. Several sector leaders commented on the state taking money from businesses in the form of a tax (levy) and giving it back 'with strings attached'. Others commented that it was wrong to disband the UKCES (UK Commission for Employment and Skills), the widely highly-regarded non-departmental government body coordinating employer demand. Overall, sector leaders are largely in favour of governance structures being truly employer-led and allowed to 'get on with it' with a minimum of interference from the state, but do not feel that this is what is happening. All this would appear to back the view that the reform process itself is driven by ideology rather than an appraisal of what employers actually want, or why they engage.

On the positive side, sector leaders reported many instances where finance directors of large companies have realised that the levy is there to be used and are, for the very first time, having conversations with their learning and development and/or HR departments, which have, in turn, revealed how these departments had not historically been influencing their senior management teams (SMTs) to take staff development seriously as a route to innovation, growth and productivity. There was strong agreement across roundtables that employers *should* be in control of what they are trying to do to for their workforce.

Examples of employers 'driving' skills development

The work and views of 11 large employer providers and four trade bodies were represented at the roundtables. All the employer providers taking part in the research offered apprenticeships in customer service, business administration and/or other cross-sector occupational areas. This was in addition to their core operational areas of retail, health, care, finance, aviation, IT and/or advanced engineering and manufacturing.

Notwithstanding the overall view of providers that nothing much has changed in terms of who drives skills policies, a limited number of large employers are however 'driving' skills development in unprecedented ways:

- a number helped devise the standards and the content of assessments
- they hold the purse strings and decide how and when to spend their levy funds
- they decide the standards and levels to be offered¹⁰
- some solely decide if learners are ready for gateway (the pre-assessment milestone).

Some employers are fundamentally changing along the lines that the government intends, by becoming employer-providers and dedicating resource to managing the levy funds, but this is often at the expense of major operational changes elsewhere in the business that one blue-chip described to us as a 'vast internal productivity cost', and perhaps not one they would have voluntarily chosen to undergo.

One example is a large accountancy company whose apprenticeship manager said that the firm is happy that it is driving skills training forward successfully, but that it has been 'resource heavy and time intensive', which her particular company was able to afford to do only because it is already a very successful and growing business. It was interesting to note that this company is now taking the commercialisation of publicly funded training to the next level by taking their own experience of developing and delivering apprenticeships back to the training market, and thus grasping a consultancy market opportunity.

Another example came from a director of a multinational high-tech engineering services company which has made substantial internal investment to set up new systems, processes and practices across multiple divisions (finance, IT, shop floor, HR) in order to 'make the most of the levy'. He felt that the FE system has vastly improved and that employers like him have more

¹⁰ Or at least initiate the proposal of the level at which standards should be developed. The Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA) is the final arbiter of whether or not a level or standard can be approved for delivery. There are numerous examples of employer-led groups suggesting that a standard should be at one level, only for the IfA to refuse to approve it unless it is pitched at something different.

control. He will take advice and guidance from providers but feels in the driving seat and is 'very happy about it'. He did, however, appeal to government to stop 'tweaking' policy and let the new system bed-in, because changes cause significant disruption, reorganisation, wasted effort and cost to organisations such as his.

The hair and beauty sector is an excellent example of where a whole sector has been authoritatively and collaboratively led throughout the reforms by employer groups, as they have done historically. A leader from the hair and beauty training sector explained how strong and credible employer representatives played a key role in the Trailblazer process. She reported three factors of success of these sector trade associations:

1. they do not foreground the interests of a few employers or just large employers
2. they communicate effectively and efficiently across the sector
3. they have the expertise to interpret what educationalists, policy-makers and employers mean and need.

The Barbering Standard, for example, was launched in 2017 after strong awarding organisation and trade association involvement. This included feedback on the assessment plan and drafts of supporting documentation that was taken on-board. For this sector, reforms have been 'a positive move overall' largely due to an effective 'intermediate tier' (between individual employers and central government).

Another example of successful employer engagement is through corporate social responsibility (CSR). Providers reported using CSR policies to effectively open out opportunities that may not otherwise have been seen by employers to exist. There was a feeling, however, that these examples of significant employer engagement were felt by some sector leaders to be exceptions that proved the rule, rather than evidence of any significant and positive change in dynamics.

Although apprenticeships dominate the thinking of leaders involved in skills development and therefore employer relationships, pre-employment programmes have also had a major role to play. One leader said that the best example of how they are working with employers is in pre-employment programmes that prepare learners for an employer's specialist sector or skills requirements. These programmes have been shown to add efficiencies to recruitment and onboarding processes and can also encourage employers to acknowledge the benefits of partnering with the FE sector. It is therefore another example of market mediation – of how the supply side creates the demand from employers – which brings into question how far employers can be said to be in the driving seat of the process. Clearly, they have huge influence on the final decisions regarding how or whether engagement in FE takes place – but in most cases this is through a partnership with the FE supply side rather than through employers autonomously exercising control.

Employers not involved in FE and skills

The massive drop in numbers of apprentices starting shows that far fewer employers are involved in FE and skills than before the reforms, and the government's target of 3 million apprenticeship starts by March 2020 (a date which was set with the end of the 2015 Parliament in mind but was overtaken by events) has long since ceased to be seen as realistic.

Sector leaders were clear that, overall, the employers they worked with do not, as a rule, want the extensive involvement in government-funded skills programmes that policy envisages. This was a very strong theme across all the roundtables that we conducted across the country, and the following quotes are typical examples.

Employers don't want more involvement in FE.

Employers don't want to be in the driving seat: They've got their day job to do!

Employers really don't want a business relationship with the state. The only relationship they'll have is a contractual relationship to release the money.

Unpicking the generalisation that employers do not want to get involved in government-funded skills programmes for their employees and potential new recruits, there are a number of distinct reasons why this might be. These fall into at least one of three main themes:

1. personal perspectives and behaviours of senior management teams (SMTs)
2. funding and regulatory requirements
3. inappropriate and inflexible content of training programmes.

We now consider each of these in turn.

Personal perspectives and behaviours of SMTs

It was clear from sector leaders that they felt that some employers simply do not have an outlook on business where learning and development is valued or is integral to their strategy and growth plans. Extremely few employers go a step further to help govern corporate responsibility for skills development in their sector or for the nation, as the government wants. Individual employer leaders' motivations are crucial in whether or not they will engage in FE. One example of this came from a large independent training provider working with a major national employer who said that around 60 per cent of HR departments in local branches had shown interest in apprenticeships for their staff, but senior management teams only allowed three of approximately 600 potential employees to enrol.

Most of the employers we spoke to acknowledged that they do not have the capacity or capability in-house to take a leading role in skills development administration, teaching and learning, and assessment; nor do they desire to do so; nor could their businesses afford to invest to grow it successfully even if they

did. Indeed, employment practice is increasingly to specialise in core activities and outsource supporting functions to external expertise: 'They don't want to be part of the training and see that as the provider's job and expertise.'

A few employers were reported as having put forward what were considered unsatisfactory arguments to providers as justifications for not engaging. For example, as one sector leader put it, '[they are] just saying "young people aren't ready" instead of taking responsibility for helping to do something about it'.

The sector leaders that we talked to highlighted a more fundamental issue about differences in the language used by the business and education sectors and the need to close this gap. FE colleges in particular were felt to be experiencing a larger culture gap than independent providers who (by virtue of their greater engagement in work-based learning) are generally seen as more in tune with the commercial world and able to speak its language. However, there were examples given where employers used outdated yet still common definitions of FE as 'remedial' or 'second-best to higher education'. Our respondents felt strongly that a shared language was necessary, one that was less about employers' economic need and more about the building of expertise for the future – a small but significant difference.

When I learned to drive the car was dual control; we need a dual control between the employer and the provider as both are understanding things from different angles.

Funding and regulatory requirements

Sector leaders in our research were highly critical of the funding system and regulation of apprenticeships.

Government funding restrictions do not lend themselves to best service employer or learner needs and address skills shortages.

The levy was presented as a solution to a broken system – but it's just another manifestation of it.

Eighteen months to get approval for a new standard is far too long for employers. Business practices and technology have moved on in that time.

Regulatory requirements repeatedly surfaced at our roundtables as a block to provider delivery, employer engagement or both. There is a general feeling in the sector that the state officials in charge of such regulation (and indeed of driving the process of reform overall) often lack the skills base to make the proper informed decisions that are needed. Several employers cited instances where Trailblazer groups had had their proposals for apprenticeship standards at a particular level turned down by officials with directives to either pitch them at a different level or to drop them altogether, even though the officials had no connection with the industry concerned and were not considered to have the experience or expertise to make such judgements. Other regulation, such as the increasingly stringent constraints on subcontracting, appears to be in response to relatively isolated cases of bad practice as opposed to widespread, significant and underlying problems.

Over time, trust between the provider base and the state has eroded, making it even harder for the supply side as a whole to deliver what employers want. Subcontracting and supply chains in particular are, of course, an intrinsic part of business practice everywhere but appear to be treated with suspicion by the Department for Education and its associated agencies, which increasingly micromanage the process instead of taking overviews of the system. As one major employer put it during our discussions, 'A good analogy here is when you buy a BMW you know the quality will be good because you know they manage their supplier quality – you don't go and check their suppliers yourself!'

Inappropriate and inflexible content of training programmes

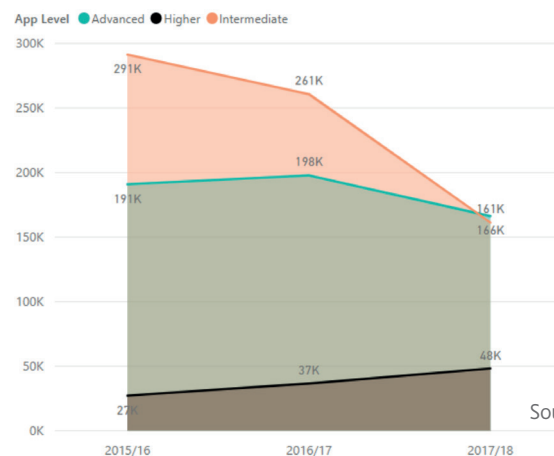
Our research found sector leaders to be acutely aware of the mismatch between their offer and what employers say they want. The standards that have been developed, coupled with the introduction of the compulsory levy, have seen employers apparently investing in their talent pipelines at higher levels of learning and

skills (Levels 4 to 7). This is strikingly illustrated in Figure 5, which charts the collapse of intermediate apprenticeship starts after the introduction of the levy in May 2017, and the near-doubling from a low base of higher-level apprenticeships.

This shift was not seen by our respondents as an accurate reflection of overall skills needs in a sector or industry. Instead, it is just seen as an 'easy win' by levy payers looking to recoup levy expenditure for some training benefit, maximising the productivity return for a minimum of employment and recruitment costs in an area where it is available, rather than where it is needed.

The vast majority of industrial sectors offering mass employment and that are essential to society require mainly lower-level skills – care, health, retail, hair, catering, hospitality and so on. The analysis of sector leaders during this research was that a skills gap is opening up at the lower levels. Lower-level apprenticeship demand from learners and employers, most of which was serviced by frameworks is now not being met by the supply system, which has deliberately reduced funding for them and is increasingly focused on higher levels of apprenticeship – the UK Education Select Committee has even recommended that the growth of degree apprenticeships should be made a 'strategic priority' of the IfA (UK Parliament, 2018b). However, as one sector leader

Figure 5: Total by year and app level



Source: DfE, 2019

commented, 'The move from frameworks to standards creates a skills gap and it is a massive change in what providers are required by the state to do compared to what employers want.'

Representatives that researchers talked to from awarding organisations, whose core role and specialism is to develop learning programmes and assessments, strongly agreed that Trailblazers had not included enough stakeholders and expertise in their processes, which was then reflected in the standards that they produced. In the words of one senior leader from an awarding organisation,

[Trailblazers] initially had no idea how to design learning programmes or assessments. There was a lack of expertise in employers that meant they were unable to play the 'employer-led' role.

This was often compounded by a huge churn of employer members in the group, all of whom have different interests, so different employers pull in different directions. Awarding organisations tried to get sight of the process but were kept at arm's length by government adhering to the concept of employers 'leading'. Eventually, awarding organisations were 'let in' but it was felt to be too late in the day, when employers were struggling to design suitable assessment plans. 'The die had already been cast,' as one sector leader put it to us.

Respondents to our research felt that this had led to some standards being too niche to enable viable and effective delivery and assessment, while others are too expensive to deliver. Skills Minister Anne Milton MP has repeatedly pointed to the proportion of standards going up compared to frameworks, but sector leaders felt this is due more to funding levers shutting off the viability of frameworks than the attractiveness of many of the standards that are on offer.

The sector leaders we spoke to, including employer-providers, said that the system does not now sufficiently concentrate on wider individual need; that it devalues lower-level training

by inaccurately assuming that a concentration on economic need will secondarily address these issues. For 16–18-year-old apprentices in particular, many standards were said to be too specialist, too early. Our respondents advocated the need for a much greater emphasis on functional skills, life skills and employability skills, along with resilience and other skills, to withstand the stresses of modern life (mainly in the context of young people). Building soft and life skills into apprenticeship standards would, they felt, help UK productivity. As one respondent put it:

There's no chance of apprentices who are following the current standards being the next generation running new businesses because they teach a narrow range of vocationally-specific skills, behaviours and knowledge associated with these skills.

The example of construction

The themes outlined above that negatively affect employer engagement are not isolated. Rather, they combine in particular ways within the contexts of different industrial sectors. The construction industry, for example, is characterised by tight schedules, narrow profit margins and highly regulated health and safety conditions. Its nature is increasingly affected by the development and introduction of technology and automation. Furthermore, much of the workforce is 'labour-only', subcontracted from small (and usually) non-levy paying employers. Training is therefore still often seen by many as a burden, with at least some levy-payers feeling that because they have paid for the training upfront, they do not want apprentices to leave to pursue careers elsewhere. The apprenticeship funding rules also only allow for a small proportion of the levy to be transferred down supply chains to non-levy paying employers.¹¹

¹¹ Indeed, a parliamentary written answer from the Treasury elicited that 'the number of businesses paying the apprenticeship levy is not available' (UK Parliament, 2018c) so making judgements about the levels of overall employer engagement with the levy is actually proving more difficult than anticipated.



These elements combine to mean that the major employers tend to only want, or really need, a small pool of highly skilled employees who are competent from day one and who do not require extensive training. One sector leader told our roundtables that the new carpentry apprenticeship standard:

... had been largely drawn up on the basis of the dominance of a major employer whose business model relied on freelancers rather than employed staff – this made the standard largely irrelevant for the many smaller employers who did not operate on this model.

This all combines to work to the detriment of the non-levy paying SMEs who stand to benefit most from the oversupply of skilled labour by the levy-payers.

Providers navigating the FE system – market mediators

Sector leaders were clear to us that any rhetoric of employers generally going to providers is simply wrong. In reality, providers have to work very hard to make inroads with employers who mostly do not yet understand the potential benefits, or the complex processes, systems and content involved in training provision, and apprenticeships in particular. Many employers that have not previously offered apprenticeships remain extremely difficult to convince to become engaged and start apprentices now.

The vast majority of promotion of and employer engagement with apprenticeships – certainly among SMEs – is therefore down to providers, who are adapting to having staff skilled at market mediation. They must be the ‘trusted adviser’ to advise and guide employers on the journey through a highly regulated and complex field that is not their specialism. Sector leaders are therefore quick to highlight how important up-to-date knowledge and experience of industries is to the FE workforce – in fact, it is absolutely essential in meeting the expectations of employers. ITPs in particular consider understanding modern industries vital to high quality market mediation. For example, in the finance sector, high-street branches are not essential any more except for cross-selling opportunities, and skills demand at every level is instead in finance, cyber security, compliance and online banking. Providers need to recognise and cater for this.

There was a consensus that the large majority of employers know extremely little about the apprenticeship system before talking to providers:

Providers have a role in articulating the boundaries of a problem that employers can solve using the tools at our disposal.

Employers want to be told what’s best for them out of what’s possible.

This means providers combining their knowledge of what the state will fund and how, with what other tools they may additionally be able to bring to bear on the problem and offering this to an employer as a solution even where it may involve an extra direct cost to them.

Providers have a long and successful track record of leading skills development by going to influential stakeholders of all types and interpreting demand, then shaping activities to make them ‘fit’. Sector leaders were sure that this process will continue in

the new landscape. However, the current swathe of reforms has made moving outside the state offer commercially risky, and the intolerance of failure by the state (evidenced by its constant realignment of rules and regulations) may mean sector leaders have become somewhat preoccupied with promoting, engaging, interpreting and explaining policy, thus losing sight of the wider offer they have at their disposal. It is worth remembering however that this market mediation role will probably not be needed with such intensity in the future as it is now. The pool of participating employers will become knowledgeable, and policy *will* mature – but only if it is not replaced first.

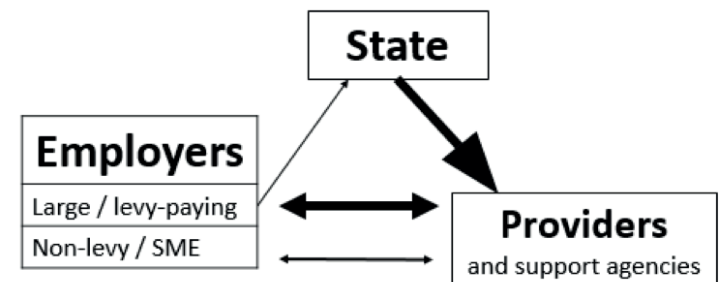
The 'bigger picture' of quality learning experiences for employers, employees and those preparing for the labour market is core to their professional interest and mission. For example, several leaders reminded colleagues that lots of groups of the population are far from getting into the labour market and that education is more than 'education for employment' – it is about active citizenship, contributing to society, and maintaining health and well-being. As one leader put it, 'While there's a risk of providers "dancing to the tune of apprenticeships", there's so much else to vocational education and skills.'

The evidence we gathered from sector leaders firmly reflects their belief that the *state* is in the driving seat. It controls the money, is always legally responsible and has to regulate the market in some way to help control supply and demand. The discussion to have is about the amount or degree of detailed control that the state and others should have at any point in an employer's (and learner's and provider's) journey. To return to our driving seat analogy: as a broad generalisation, employers would like a 'lift' from publicly funded apprenticeships and other skills programmes, but probably in a different car to the one that

the government is currently offering. Some employers that have engaged with the levy have definitely gained their driving 'licence' through investing in learning and development and are now part of the FE delivery system, but this appears to be the case for only a small number of large companies.

Although it is a generalisation, we can say that apprenticeship policy has split employers into two distinct groups – large levy-payers and non-levy/SMEs – with (as one sector leader put it) 'flimsy' connections between employers and the state, albeit they are strong enough to bound the wishes of employers within those that the state approves. Meanwhile, the relationships between both employers and providers, and the state and providers, have become stronger as the need to implement policy and ideology has become primary in shaping the purpose of FE. This reflects the increasingly important role providers have in the implementation of government policy despite it not being recognised in the 'employers in the driving seat' rhetoric. It does not of course equate with putting employers in the driving seat because what the system delivers is still ultimately shaped by what the *state* believes *employers* need and will pay for, rather than what employers say they really *want*.

Figure 6



Sector leaders foresee a set of likely knock-on effects of such a managed-market system:

- A loss of niche areas of skills where it is not viable to deliver or assess in small numbers.
- Regionalisation: clusters of FE colleges and higher education institutions with local SMEs. More providers going for bespoke customised offers, others specialising by sector and levy employers, meaning ultimately less choice for employers. This and the previous bullet point add up to a need for coordination of organisations.
- A skewing of supply to the needs of large levy-paying employers rather than to the needs of employers more generally.
- Employers will continue to need providers and other support organisations for delivery, guidance, recruitment and generally navigating a highly regulated market of public money.

A question that was often discussed during our research was whether the concept of employers in the driving seat actually *deters* some employers from engaging. The fact that the apprenticeship service is being developed so that a small business can delegate all the control to the training provider would appear to be a signal that the government recognises this as an issue. Additionally, while employers may want to recruit skills and develop their workforce in general terms, they will certainly not engage if the skills products on offer are not suitable for whatever reason. Government has however put very many eggs in the apprenticeship basket, often giving the impression that it is trying to solve the skills shortage by apprenticeships alone and attaching the driving seat narrative in an attempt to entice employers to engage with the strategy. However, while some employers are doing so, many more are either not, or (according to sector leaders) are actively rejecting the approach by writing the apprenticeship levy off as a tax. In many cases this is because

the offer of 'driving seat' influence on the design of standards in return for a compulsory levy to pay for their delivery is not realistic or attractive enough to warrant their attention. It demands too much of them, returns too little and could therefore be a barrier to engagement rather than an incentive.

Returning again to the analogy of driving, employers ultimately have to agree to being given a lift, to get on-board. Many simply do not have the capacity, capability or outlook to agree to even discuss the potential benefits of skills training – they will not even sit in the provider's/state's stationary car, let alone drive it. Many other employers agree to first meetings with providers but are then slow or unwilling to sign contracts or to consider and action all the required processes and information (of which there are plenty). Alternatively, they conclude from what they have learned that apprenticeships do not fit their business need. The result, according to findings from our research, is that the number and scale of the changes has actually slowed the system down and cut engagement rather than enhanced it.

Many simply do not have the capacity, capability or outlook to agree to even discuss the potential benefits of skills training

No leaders that we talked to fundamentally questioned the government's priority of getting value for money and a better trained workforce. None seriously

questioned the view that employers need to be able to more accurately articulate their training needs so that these can be met. However, the particular ways in which this 'driving seat' policy has been implemented have not lived up to this ambition and have not delivered (so far at least) the outputs that were intended. The 'driving seat' concept is not therefore recognised as a wholesale generalisable statement of how the system actually works.

Meanwhile, reforms to non-apprenticeship systems of FE delivery such as the AEB budget have not improved employer engagement at all (nor were they designed to) and in fact the amount of delivery as a whole is decreasing. Provision at Level 2 and below appears to be suffering as the government increasingly prioritises

higher levels of learning for funding and attention. The feeling is therefore that the new skills development system is not working at present because it is not properly serving the needs either of employers or of the population at large – levy-funded apprenticeships have too narrow a focus to serve the population as a whole, but the focus on non-apprenticeship programmes is being diluted. If employers were to be in the driving seat of a publicly funded skills system, they would be able to buy whatever they wanted, but this is not the case – what they are able to buy is still ultimately determined by what the state feels they require, because the state sees their needs as synonymous with those of society as a whole, for which it is responsible. Delegates qualified this by pointing out how some of the large levy-paying employers can now be seen as extremely influential (mostly those employers with a long tradition of apprenticeships), but it is clear that SMEs generally aren't – indeed, far fewer are engaged at all.

CHAPTER 4

Follow the satnav, or follow your instinct? How behaviours govern purpose in FE

The project team was keen to discover to what extent – irrespective of their underlying intent – sector leaders felt their decisions and delivery practice affected the overall purpose, direction and output of FE.

One item under consideration was to what extent employers and the supply side were able to 'speak the same language', and how fluently such 'languages' are spoken by the staff that are responsible for implementing the system in practice. One roundtable thought that 'employers don't have a training narrative ... [employers and providers lack] a useful common terminology that everyone understands', which led to a system producing unintended consequences and outputs that never quite match their promise. This was not a universally held view, however, with other roundtables putting forward the view that there is a common language being spoken, but the individuals involved in having the conversations lack the expertise to use it. One sector leader said that there was 'brilliant strategic leadership ... within employer organisations but it is not supported to translate to a national scale'. There was also criticism that officials within the state often lack the necessary leadership and management skills – not to say occupational experience – to be able to support the decisions they make surrounding what the FE system should or can offer to employers. The Salford roundtable in particular latched on to a part of the stimulus paper (Warner and Gladding, 2018) that talked about the levels of decision-making within FE organisations, saying that the scope to act as

leaders is often not present (or not sufficiently developed) below management levels. They felt that there was a definite need to develop these skills in employees right across organisations all over the FE sector and indeed well beyond, including into government departments.

Some attendees felt that the belief of employers that the FE system does not meet their needs had come about because they were not able to look beyond the product – and because providers are risk-averse, they are often not offering employers more than they think the employers will understand, which are products that the state has formulated for its own, often political, ends. This resonates with the findings of Hamel and Prahalad (1990) that thinking of businesses as a portfolio of products and markets, rather than a bundle of competencies, is a critical mistake. In their view, strategic management is about identifying, developing and harmonising core competencies across the organisation. In the case of the FE sector, this could result in a wider and broader learning offer for the deployment of the same resources but, as it is, the system is now in a self-perpetuating loop where, although the primary roles of the actors appear to change, the concentration on product rather than competency means that the relationships between them ultimately do not. The nature of decisions and choices therefore also do not fundamentally change, and the output therefore never fundamentally changes either – it is always a product, a reaction to a government priority, rather than a holistic response to a learning need, because the state, employers and providers are not framing the market any other way.

Many of these products do serve as a 'gateway' to engage some employers in wider forms of training. But despite the government's aim to make sure that FE provides 'the skilled workforce employers need and helps individuals reach their full potential', it may well be that the decisions of those within the FE system merely deliver 'the skilled workforce employers need' as adjudged by the state rather than employers. At best, this

can only incidentally fulfil the objective of 'help[ing] individuals reach their full potential', which really requires concentration as a separate objective in its own right.

Our research respondents tended to see both objectives as the requirement of an effective FE system. One Bath roundtable attendee stated that the '16–18 phase is a huge period of personal character identification of which occupational identification is a huge part. The system needs to keep this wider in context in scope'. However, attendees tended also to agree that through their actions and decisions in the market they had actually facilitated the dominance of the government focus, often at the expense of the individual.

We found therefore that what many sector leaders believe should be a holistic and universal FE system, offering benefits to individuals and employers both singly and collectively, is in effect being turned towards the delivery of a targeted, industrialised skills strategy that focuses only on the employer at a fairly macro level. This is because 'employers are seen [by the state] as a direct link to the economy in a way that providers are not'. The methodology of this is predicated on the existence of a suite of products which insufficiently deliver a wider general education. However, both government and employers think that the products have these outputs embedded, and the nature of the heavily regulated and commercially risky FE market is such that it is often not in the interests of providers to dissuade them from this notion. A narrative takes hold therefore that the reason why the outputs do not suitably serve the purposes assigned to them is because the supply side is delivering them badly. Government actions taken to mitigate this have generated a culture of compliance within the supply side that, as one sector leader contended, 'artificially inflates small problems and loses focus on the bigger, wider issues', and also actually increases the commercial risk that providers take in 'playing the state's game' at all. It is a vicious, reinforcing circle.

How did we get here?

Over the nine roundtables we were thus able to discern by degrees that sector leaders felt that this compliance culture had been placed upon them without sufficient pushback from themselves, hence the comments about providers having a 'victim mentality' that were noted earlier. It was also felt that the outputs of the system, while not significantly changing in and of themselves in terms of content or delivery, spoke more to an industrialised skills strategy and increasingly less to a wider social purpose.

This was almost a *mea culpa* from the supply side – that it had allowed this situation to develop by failing to challenge it properly. We had asked the question in the stimulus paper 'How far is provision the result of decisions and practice in the sector rather than through inherent design and policy intent?' and the early answers we had received from the roundtables elicited views on market mediation – that providers had the power to guide employers to purchase a variety of streams of provision including those with a wider purpose. And, yet, they had defaulted to promoting the products of limited scope that the state had offered them funding for, lost sight of a wider remit, and then taken the blame from the likes of Doug Richard (2012) that they were foisting unsuitable products on employers for their own commercial ends. Actually, they were just pursuing a policy of the state that sees social justice in terms of its connection to economics rather than as a discrete entity in its own right.

Two roundtables in particular – the first London group and the Gateshead group – discussed how the supply side should respond to such misperceptions or misunderstandings about their role and their value in the system. Both saw value in the collective voice and the value of representative bodies, be they at a national level (such as AELP) or at a sub-national level (such as local provider networks), in articulating the role and value of the supply side and ensuring that these views are considered in the design and implementation of policy. There was, however, a notable difference in exactly *how much* value was placed on the collective

voice. The London roundtable was supportive but there was also an undercurrent that if the collective voice was not there, supply-side organisations would nevertheless still be able to represent themselves with a degree of vigour. This was far less evident in Gateshead, where there was a stronger sense of an almost cultural attachment to collective action, and a feeling that, without an overarching voice, individual supply-side actors were almost completely unable to make any impact on anything other than their own situations – and even that ability felt limited. Gateshead attendees were, for example, far more vocal about the adverse impact of the reduction or loss of regional funding agency representatives, whereas London attendees – while agreeing this was an issue – seemed generally less concerned that it posed a serious problem.

This may reflect the different skills infrastructures in London and the provinces – London has a powerful London Assembly that gives a relatively enhanced opportunity for local provision to have a voice, whereas the North East does not. It is difficult to draw definite conclusions from this comparison of two roundtables however, because the other roundtables did not particularly stress a strong view one way or the other, but it does indicate that there may be some work to do on identifying how devolution of FE systems can affect the thinking and role of supply-side actors.

CHAPTER 5

Taking in the view – wider influences on FE leadership thinking

Thinking beyond state and employers – wider influences on skills leaders

To some extent this view of the state as far and away the single biggest actor and influence on the FE sector was reinforced by answers to questions that were asked of the roundtables about which factors affected the provision and purpose of the FE and skills sector – overall the biggest responses were very much related to the actions of government. Some felt that a succession of government policy initiatives that were perceived to have been unsuitable or to have failed had inflated the perceived risk of trying anything new, making it feel safer to go with something that was at least partly known (even if it had failed in part) than something totally new. This is why 'new' initiatives and provision almost inevitably have more than a little resonance of something that has already been tried before. This attitude almost obliterates the useful learning that can be gained from the experience of failure and breeds an increasingly inert market that is fearful of real innovation – one that Parliament feels 'reduces the ability of providers to innovate new forms of delivery and react to the needs of an evolving economy' (UK Parliament, 2018a: para 128).

FE sector leaders did however identify a vast array of influences on their thinking when looking to the future purposes and strategic directions of their organisations and the wider FE system. *Figure 7* shows the considerations of a single group of 20 FE leaders at one roundtable, who agreed these factors within

just a 10-minute period. It is not exhaustive but does illustrate the diversity of factors impacting on FE leaders' thinking about fundamental questions such as 'what matters' and 'why are we doing this?'

Figure 7



Other respondents produced similar lists of influences, from which common themes were easy to identify.

- **The economy and labour market:** for example, national economic prosperity; lasting effects of the 2009 recession; international competitiveness and distinctiveness from emerging economies; levels and nature of local unemployment; macro labour market changes such as the ongoing shift away from traditional manufacturing towards the service sector and the digitalisation across many (but not all) industrial sectors; precise skills needs of employers and the quality of articulation of these needs; growth of

emergent industries (e.g. space technology, renewable energy, gaming software development); local access to mass employment sectors (public and private, e.g. local authorities, care); effectiveness of local enterprise partnerships; ageing workforces.

- **Learners' experiences:** for example, local community; learner aspirations and disadvantage; parents; socioeconomic characteristics of neighbourhoods; champions of inclusion and participation in society and the economy; experience of schooling; access to impartial careers education; mental health and well-being; use of social media and other ICTs; propensity of hidden learning needs.
- **Technology:** for example, advancements and applications for learning and in the workplace.

In addition to the main themes above, some leaders pointed to how the media portrays FE, public relations and public opinion and understandings of the contribution of FE to learners' lives and the economy. Others highlighted the availability and affordability of transport from home to sites of learning, employment and work experience, an especially acute problem for younger people living in rural areas (FSB, 2016b). Also, the uneven geographic spread of industries sometimes means that learners do not get the opportunity to undertake the work experience required for starting along a chosen career path because the opportunities simply do not exist in a given area – a particular concern given the emerging design and priorities of the T-level programme.

Respondents also identified party political philosophy and the expediency of the governing authorities as another 'wider influence' on FE. Taxation policies, fallout from Brexit, including immigration policy changes, devolution and the selection of local priorities and projects by elected mayors were mentioned, all of which go well beyond the scope of this report and FE in general.

There is therefore a vast array of influences on FE leaders' thinking – numerous, diverse, constant, somewhat unpredictable, conflicting, challenging, and absorbing of time and energy. Their sheer number could feel chaotic, but, by and large, most sector leaders do not report a sense of unmanageable or un-navigable chaos stemming from wider influences – indeed, they took these in their stride, as part of the professional challenge of the job, so the chaos seems only to be felt by some leaders some of the time.

Continuing the car or bus journey analogy running throughout this research, these multiple influences can be seen as traffic at a major intersection that is somehow all heading straight for the providers – indeed, one might conjure up an image of rush-hour in a major global city, as in the image of Hanoi in Vietnam, below.



Source: Vietnam News, November 2015: <https://vietnamnews.vn/society/279110/fewer-vn-traffic-accidents-in-2015.html#uQwjvko0d4mrEDYv.97>

In fact, the news article from which this image was taken was highlighting the sharp decrease in the number and severity of accidents in recent years. The implementation of technological advances had contributed greatly to the authorities' capacity to deal with regulatory infringements and overall capacity to direct and manage the ever-increasing volumes of traffic. Despite appearances, there is therefore an order to the chaos that over time is improving the quality of output, and it seems that much of the same principle is felt to apply in FE.

That said, it should be noted that something of a sense of chaos did come through strongly in the form of problems experienced stemming from government officials. Specifically, their lack of coordination of the different elements of widespread reform, lack of understanding of what successful implementation in the sector is, and misalignment of intentions and resources. All of these have had a major effect on the choices and decisions that sector leaders are faced with: 'We are left to piece together a system that on the surface sounds good, but from a practical level is greatly underfunded for the quality provision that is expected,' said one. This reinforced the view that a heavily regulated and micro-managed system was forcing the supply side to make commercial decisions and take commercial actions that did not necessarily coincide with what it feels the system should be there to do.

Implications of advances in technology for FE

Technological advancement was identified by researchers early in the project as a prime example of a potentially very important influence on leadership thinking in FE in the future. Our stimulus paper (Warner and Gladding, 2018) devoted a section to encouraging thinking about the impact of technology, raising a small selection of fundamental concepts and theories aiming to stimulate leaders' thought on digitalisation, the Fourth Industrial Revolution and implications for leading.

We had expected that many sector leaders would see the accelerated rate of technological advance as an opportunity or a

threat (or both) to their organisations and mission going forward. What was both striking and surprising was that, by and large, in the first two phases of roundtables the subject was barely raised or discussed. Given the weight of thinking and evidence from social science and other disciplines about the importance of technological change in all aspects of our lives, the researchers therefore decided to orchestrate a 'window' or space for leaders to reflect on its impact using increasingly more direct questions on the subject of technology such as, 'What are the implications of modern technology for learning organisations that have strong employer links?' It was only then that the subject appeared to generate any serious debate.

Even so, the first response from the first roundtable we put this question to was that it was policy-makers (i.e. the state) rather than themselves that needed to keep up with technological advances because content ends up being out of date before it is approved for delivery – again indicating an overwhelming preoccupation with what the state is doing, rather than looking at the range of forces acting upon FE in a more abstract sense, or even taking much account of how they could affect it themselves. It was clear however that even when we asked how the development of technology might make it easier for employers to deliver learning themselves, (which may possibly render the role of providers as currently formulated redundant and dealing a terminal blow to business strategies as they stand), this seemed to have generated relatively little prior thinking. We could not discern whether this was because sector leaders did not see technology as a major factor in their plans (which would be surprising given its ubiquity in modern life) or whether it had simply not previously occurred to them to think of it in this way (which would be equally surprising given the seniority and experience of the sector leaders we talked to).

Where FE leaders did share their thinking and debated the role and effect of technology in FE, three themes emerged from their responses:

- a) Technology is constantly changing, and the system needs to adapt in order to 'keep up'.
- b) Technology is ubiquitous in modern life, yet its usage socially is little guarantee of effectiveness in learning and work.
- c) Technology facilitates administration, record-keeping, communications and assessment in FE today, but there is huge potential to do this better.

The next part of this chapter looks at each of these three responses in more detail, and finally at a more radical technological scenario.

- **Technology is constantly changing**

The rate of digital change in recent years has meant providers cannot keep up with every technological solution and automation that many employers use.

In the words of one respondent, 'providers have no chance against the tech in employer sites'. Further, several roundtables raised the issue of FE policy-makers not being up to speed on technology used in the sector, nor by learners and employers. This leads to missed technological opportunities with learning programmes being out of date before, or shortly after, being approved by government agencies for first delivery. Many felt that leadership teams need a broad oversight of current applications of technology across different industrial sectors, and that leaders have a role to play in supporting practices whereby willing employers share their uses of technology and equipment for programme design and delivery. As one leader put it, this would foster a 'shared ownership of developing skills in young people'.

There is also the 'sectorification' and specialisation of FE providers, which has been talked about for some years in the FE sector and in which technology is a major driving force. ITPs may well be better placed than general FE colleges to respond, it was thought at roundtables – 'the clue is in the name "general"'. However, leaders were at pains to remind colleagues that some

sector subject areas will see relatively less change – for example, construction and childcare. One of the roundtables took the discussion about products and specialisation further, debating whether narrowing options of study too early in the education system – in the way that some felt that T-levels threaten to do – may only cater to the short-term needs of industry, or sometimes even individual employers, without properly addressing wider and more transferable needs across sectors or society. This resonates with the earlier point about whether FE’s purpose encompasses a dual mandate or not, and the feeling among some that the ‘second chance’ being offered by the system is merely a second chance to meet short-term employer needs, rather than to gain a general education. Leeds attendees in particular, certainly felt that ‘the dial had shifted too far’, and that a greater emphasis is now needed on functional skills, life skills and employability skills, along with ‘softer’ factors such as resilience, if learners are to benefit from a rounded learning experience. As one put it, ‘teaching narrow vocationally-specific skills won’t encourage innovation and running new businesses in the future’.

The view of FE professionals that we talked to is that the attention of policy-makers has been captured by high-end technology and skills in emergent sectors with relatively low levels of employment. More attention is needed on lower-end digital skills, and furthermore curriculum-related policy-making needs to become far more responsive to change.

One sector leader wondered whether the relatively high availability of capital resources that is made available to the college sector may not have contributed to the issue that they are seen as less engaged with employers than their ITP counterparts. Investment in high-tech capital by a college using public funds will always be subject to more regulation, controls and scrutiny than when it is undertaken by an employer using its own working capital funds or borrowing. This, therefore, makes it less likely that frequent rounds of new investment will take place. Meanwhile, ITPs that do not have wide access to public funds for capital investment are forced to be more innovative – working

more closely with the employer to access the industry-standard equipment they already have as part of their training offer.

- **Technology is ubiquitous in modern life**

The key themes that came out here were threefold: that learners may love technology, but this does not necessarily translate into effective learning; that nevertheless expectations are changing, and that learners increasingly want to work online in a live setting with their providers; and that social media has a massive part to play in young people’s mental health. Leaders identified some implications of the ubiquity of technology for FE:

- There is huge potential to make more of phone apps, software packages, social media, conference calls and so on, in teaching and learning. For example, with learning increasingly taking place outside the traditional classroom, communications technology enables tutors to talk to many learners at once, remotely. Twenty-four/seven access and portability of IT kit will soon be viewed as essential – some employer providers already give iPads to all their learners – and ‘quality provision will increasingly come from how well your staff works with technology’¹².
- Technology may be characteristic of most learners’ social lives, but this is no guarantee of them being able to use it effectively for the purpose of learning. As one leader put it: ‘Software isn’t always well-designed or suitable’ and even if designed well ‘it doesn’t mean the learner has learned, the learning is real and makes sense’. This is the responsibility of the whole FE workforce.
- Mental health and relationships provision will continue to increase and needs staffing by a particularly tech-savvy workforce.

¹² Research by Newman et al (2018) found that 94 per cent of higher education students owned their own computer compared to 64 per cent of FE college students.

- **Technology facilitates administration, record-keeping, communications and assessment**

The technology exists for employers, providers and learners to all input to modern learner management platforms for tracking progress and next steps, recording attendance and attainment, etc.

The assessment of skills at the beginning of programmes and monitoring over time to facilitate the learning process is certainly where there has been most technological development in the last two to four years in FE. However, it is equally clear that national IT systems designed to facilitate joint working between employers and providers in other operational areas are still not fully in place, and the track record of bringing such projects to fruition is not reassuring.

Sector leaders were able to identify clear implications for their future use of technology for sector administration, record-keeping/reporting and learner assessment:

- They were aware that technology is often available. However, implementing it is another matter. For example, one respondent said that bolting on learning providers' 'technology within an employer base can be a real challenge' due to GDPR, cyber-security and business confidentiality concerns.
- National IT systems should support joint working between employers and providers. Several examples were repeatedly given: tracking levy pots in the apprenticeship service; finding relevant and available T-level work placements; the whole end-point assessment (EPA) system for apprenticeships needs an effective national IT infrastructure which does not yet exist.
- Leaders need informed advice to help make judicious decisions about software purchases but, more importantly, to enable staff to adopt new ways of working – the human aspect of IT.

The qualitative data above echoes quantitative research done by Jisc (formerly the Joint Information Systems Committee) (Newman and Beetham, 2017) with FE college leaders. Jisc found that the majority of college leaders – 58 per cent – said that providing greater access to data was crucial for decision-making, skills development and also useful for conveying key facts about their organisation to the local community. Further, the proportion of leaders saying that enhancing their organisation's use of technology would help meet new government expectations jumped from a third in 2016 to almost half in 2017. Also viewed as crucial by the majority of leaders was ensuring learners can access any learning resource any time on any device from anywhere (McKean, 2017).

The logical conclusion of some of the roundtable discussions about technology in an FE system where employers have a far greater role is that IT developments may make it easier for employers to deliver learning themselves and so the role of providers as currently formulated could ultimately become redundant. Leaders perceived learning technologies dissolving boundaries between learning providers and employers. At one level, 'Bricks and mortar will decrease as technology increases'; at another: 'Technology has an often-overlooked human dimension in breaking down barriers and building working relationships.' There was little doubt that 'the face of learning and training will change radically down the line' – but beyond generalities, the research team found specific examples of thinking in this area from among sector leaders difficult to come by.

That said, neither technology nor the multitude of other wider factors influencing sector leadership that have been covered in this chapter were thought likely by our respondents to lead to any potential future 'car crash' scenario for the sector. This would be characterised by redundancies for providers due to a contracted provider base; loss of niche providers and reduction of individualised, personal learning provision that supports inclusion

and tackles disadvantage; and a potential decline in quality with well-established providers exiting the market. It did not seem from the responses we gathered however that there was any feeling this would result on any large scale from the onset of technology – market dynamics between state, employers and providers would have a far bigger influence in this respect.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusions and recommendations

This report highlights ways in which FE sector leaders, experts in the field of post-16 technical education and training, view the direction of development of their sector, especially in light of the current process of reform. We spoke to around 100 senior individuals, who did not disappoint in sharing their deep professional expertise, examining their own thinking and understanding and challenging the viewpoints of others. This was an unfortunately rare opportunity to share and develop their thinking in groups and has succeeded in bringing their evidence and thought into the public domain. It was an opportunity that was welcomed and seized upon by sector leaders of all types of organisations to offer reasoned and constructive input. We are confident that the conclusions we have reached below are a fair representation of the themes that were brought to the fore in our discussions and research.

Our conclusions

We spoke to many sector leaders from all types of organisations involved in that part of FE that concentrates on non-academic skills training and learning, and are clear that there is little difference in their underlying motivations and perspectives, irrespective of what type of organisation they lead or what type of FE they deliver. Nevertheless, government policy tends to persist in seeing and reinforcing differences between (for example) colleges and ITPs. All this achieves is to lose the potential benefits that could be gained from seeing the sector as an aggregation of potential partners, by seeing it instead as a pool of potential competitors.

The considerable expertise of the FE workforce, sector leaders believe, lies in fostering and training individuals to contribute to both economic and social life

All sides felt, in general, that the sector has an important role to play in shaping the skills needs of the population to meet the needs of employers and industry. They also felt, however, that it has a wider remit of what may

loosely be termed 'life skills' which are not defined by employer needs but are nevertheless key to meeting them. The considerable expertise of the FE workforce, sector leaders believe, lies in fostering and training individuals to contribute to both economic and social life. The fear among almost everybody was that the primacy of the narrative of 'employers in the driving seat', and the policy implementation put into place to force this through, has little impact in terms of better serving employer needs, while simultaneously increasingly poorly serving wider needs beyond this.

There was consensus that the phrase 'employers in the driving seat' does not accurately describe the FE system as it currently functions.¹³ As for the phrase itself, it is not clear what employers are supposed to be in the driving seat of, as policy is set by the state, funding is held and released by the state, and the quality of delivery is monitored by the state. Only the content of delivery is in any way led by employers, but even this is heavily bounded by the state. It is instead felt that the state has erroneously synonymised its own policy objectives with employer needs, when this is demonstrably not the case in many ways.

Very few employers have the resources to engage in reformed apprenticeships in ways that both the government envisage and that business would benefit from. The vast majority of employers certainly do not see the logic in them being 'in the driving seat' in the sense of designing, controlling and delivering skills training. Further, most employers do not understand how to make the most of government-backed apprenticeships policy in any case, without drawing on the expertise of training providers. Providers

are performing a vital role of expert 'market mediators' in making the system function, because without them it will always be too challenging for enough employers to engage to make it completely representative of occupation-wide need.

The key players in the skills system – the state, employers and training providers – are out of balance with one another, and the emphasis is too heavily on the state imposing a top-down structure, rather than on the relationships between them that could result in the outputs that are aimed for. While employers in general do not want so much involvement, providers feel that their expertise and achievements are under-recognised.

While it is all very well blaming the state for any faults or misalignments in the system, the supply side is culpable in that it has not articulated its role as effectively as it could

However, while it is all very well blaming the state for any faults or misalignments in the system, the supply side is culpable in that it has not articulated its role as effectively as it could. There is certainly no desire to sideline the state or to deny its influence and importance

in the provision of a skills strategy suitable for the economy as a whole, but there is a strong feeling that if the state viewed the system less as a hierarchy and more as a process of relationships, a wider range of objectives could be simultaneously successfully addressed.

This will involve better communication between the supply side and policy-makers, and the erosion of effective communication channels between the two was regretted by many of our respondents. These are, it is felt, vital to ensure that policy intentions are clear, and that experience and evaluation can be fed back to make informed policy decisions in the future. The increased centralisation and automation of what channels there are has limited their effectiveness, and while there were some differing views as to how best this might be remedied, the common theme was that the situation must be addressed. Clearly trade bodies and networks will have a key role in this.

¹³ The exception may perhaps be the new (but relatively few) employer-providers.

In terms of the operation of the system, too much store is placed on the expertise of relatively high-level decision-makers overseeing a relatively inert system where provider staff are expected to take non-specialist employer staff through a highly regulated system of state funding with very little tolerance of failure. There is a clear need for a development of management and leaderships skills in all parts of the sector, including the state itself. This includes widening the thinking of sector leaders to the impact of technology, not just on operations but on overall strategy – an area that, in our view, was particularly 'under-thought'.

Our recommendations

For the sector as a whole

1. Resources are being used to focus priorities on the pursuit of economic competitiveness, to the exclusion of large numbers of learners and to the detriment of some types of provision. Sector leaders continue to experience on a daily basis a great need and value in supporting the modern economy and society, and policy should better reflect this dual demand. Examples of key provision that needs expanding to reflect today's world are mental health and well-being, learning at Level 2 and below, lifelong preparation for digital technologies, and careers education.
2. The communication channels between delivery organisations and decision- and policy-makers – the contacts between trade bodies, networks, individual providers and policy-makers – need to be more effective in transmitting and properly considering experience and evaluation. This does not necessarily mean a new layer of administration but does require a much-improved functioning of what is already there. The Department for Education (DfE), Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and IfA should take this into account as they develop their roles and organisational structures, and trade bodies and networks must be more assertive in making the case for the sector's views.

For policy-makers

3. Government should not mistakenly synonymise its own policy objectives with those of employers. Its policies assume (in large part incorrectly) that they know the effective contribution that employers can and are willing to make to the system, and the training needs that they have, better than employers themselves do. The term 'employers in the driving seat' is unhelpful because it does not reflect the experience of the vast majority of employers, nor properly recognise the contributions of either the state or training providers. Its continued use limits the ability of the system as a whole to address more than the sum of its parts.
4. Repeated reforms and policy amendments in the sector prevent any of them from maturing to a steady and productive stage. This mild panic that the system is never working correctly means business strategies do not innovate, think or plan properly due to a fear of failure. The approach of constant reform must stop in order to enable the system to reach a steady state and to properly evaluate what works and what does not.
5. Through this research, the sector has made a strong call for more knowledgeable and intelligent policy-making and therefore a move towards greater openness and collaboration, with providers trusted and enabled to play a far greater role in helping to shape policy. This should concentrate on optimising the relationships between the players in the technical training part of the FE system, instead of micromanaging every eventuality of how they transpire in order to promote what amounts to an ideological desire for a hierarchy.
6. Government should establish a governance and leadership programme for independent training providers, after consultation on its content, design and delivery. Unlike for colleges, no such scheme exists yet for ITPs despite the fact that, among other provision, such organisations deliver three-quarters of all apprenticeships, the government's flagship

skills programme. Any leadership programme should open up opportunities for productive communications with policy-makers and provide leaders with 'space to think' about the relationship between their individual organisations and the wider sector. This would demonstrate the trust in, and value placed on, this vital part of the FE sector, which in turn will build and reinforce constructive and collaborative partnerships to the benefit of learners. One example to influence the design of such a leadership programme would be the independently facilitated sessions for members of the Institute of Directors.

7. The different approaches to skills used by the various devolved administrations means it is difficult to judge whether it improves or degrades the effectiveness of local technical skills delivery. There would be considerable value in research into the impact of devolution on the effectiveness of delivery and policy, both in the regions and nationally.

For learning providers

8. Sector leaders should engage to a far greater extent in helping shape the technical and vocational education and skills system of the future, sharing expertise about how the system does and should work. By not doing so, many now realise they have effectively acquiesced in the creation of a system that many feel does not adequately serve its users. This means ensuring they participate in policy-makers' calls for information and proactively submitting constructive solutions, data and feedback.

9. In the new skills system, market mediation is one of the main roles of learning providers. Providers should therefore ensure that their staff development has this ability as a central objective. This could also serve as a core element of any future centralised leadership programme, as mentioned above.

10. Provider workforces should be actively supported to develop a 'shared language' with business, which some sector leaders have found particularly productive. This should centre on the expertise employers require for their own futures, and less on an attempt to adhere to 'one size fits all' skills strategies meant for an entire industrial sector.

11. The role of technology in the thinking of sector leaders is relatively bounded, and there is a need for them to think in a wider sense about its strategic, as well as its operational, impact. The Education and Training Foundation should be given clear direction to address this issue.

12. In an era of specialisation, provider leaders should regularly review their provision to ensure it reflects what best suits their competence or areas of excellence. The key message is not to try to be all things to all men, but to concentrate on delivering what works well and what they can do best.

13. As the major representative body for training providers in England, AELP should further strengthen its work to feed into skills-related discussions and facilitate access to educational expertise for other trade bodies.

14. Members of the non-academic part of the FE sector should work together to demonstrate a self-assured and authoritative workforce that makes valuable (if not vital) contributions to the UK economy and society. This would be a motivational celebration for the FE workforce. There is a huge amount to be proud of and to celebrate!

In essence, we believe that our research has allowed the supply-side players in the technical FE sector the space to reflect on their place and purpose, and to better understand whether or not these align with their underlying motivations for wanting to be involved at all. Our respondents found that they had perhaps become too submissive to a rhetoric that was ultimately moving the emphasis of their delivery too far away from where they felt it should be, and that this needs to change through a combination

of increased assertiveness on their own part, and a better recognition by the state of the drivers that are actually in play.

The FE system should look broadly similar, and serve a similar purpose, under any hue of government, and do what everyone wants it to do – to equip the UK and its employers with the tools to drive its future prosperity. It is the job of the state to create the conditions in which this can happen, not to artificially shape the system and its outputs for its own policy or ideological ends. The best examples of work-based learning in operation are always where there is a clear line of sight to work, often undertaken through genuine partnerships between employers, learners and providers, rather than artificially designating any one of them as being in the lead.

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