



FURTHER EDUCATION
TRUST FOR LEADERSHIP

FELLOWS 2015

FROM PERSONAL PASSION TO CULTURE CHANGE

ABOUT FETL

FETL is the sector's first and only independent think-tank and was conceived to offer sector colleagues the opportunity to spend time thinking, on behalf of us all, about the concerns of leadership in today's complex education and training system and to do so in order to advance knowledge and ideas for the sector's future.

FETL would like to thank the 2015 Fellows, their sponsoring organisations and our academic partner, University College London Institute of Education.

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As an independent charity and think-tank, FETL works to build and promote a body of knowledge, to inspire thought and to help prepare the FE and Skills sector for the challenges it faces now and in the future.

Our vision...

...is of an FE and Skills 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
- Sharing fresh ideas generously and informing practice with knowledge

Our mission...

...is to provide via opportunities, research grants, Fellowships and other opportunities, building the evidence base which the FE and Skills sector needs in order to think, learn and do, to change policy and to influence practice.

Our value proposition

We are loyal to the future, focused on developing the leadership of thinking in FE and Skills, as well as making a difference through scholarship that adds value for the sector as it moves forward.

Our values

As an organisation we strive to be:

Bold

We encourage new ideas to improve all aspects of FE and Skills leadership

Valued

We are creating a body of knowledge to transform both leadership learning and learners' lives

Expert

We use evidence, networks and resources sensibly and impartially

Proactive

We provoke new ways of working to deliver excellence in learning within FE and Skills

Responsible

We use our voice and assets wisely at all times

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INTRODUCTION

DAME RUTH SILVER

FETL exists to encourage the leadership of thinking in FE – a very busy sector, expected to respond to government and changes in policy at the drop of a hat. We have said before that FE and Skills is the first place to which policymakers turn when they have to make quick changes with direct impact. The FE and Skills sector is already justly famous for how well we ‘do’ this, at delivery and at leadership level.

FETL’s mission is not to develop the practice of ‘doing’ leadership, it is to develop a specific dimension of leadership, and that dimension is thinking. Thinking about other ways of doing, yes, but also thinking about other ways of being, in order to shape the future to which we are loyal. We have been talking about how this will shape our work for some time, but this report holds the first building blocks from the sector itself.

As part of this loyalty to the future, we need to be better prepared for it, and to hope that we can take responsibility for educating all the people we work with, policy makers and funders included. The future is not a place we are simply going to, it is a place we are making. Our Fellows are a key part of helping us to learn, to share and to make the future that will serve us all well. Our latest round of Grant projects also explores the possibilities of learning from other sectors, disciplines and approaches – there is no single source of evidence that we should turn to, but there is a critical mass that we need to build. Externally, we are delighted to be joined by fellow travellers – new organisations who are also focused on rigorous independent FE and Skills research.

These reports from the inaugural FETL Fellows respond to our call for learning both for short- term market need and long-term public good, and our need to look elsewhere and everywhere for this learning as we move forward. This is our true beginning, and you will see much more from us. The Fellows are part of FETL's learning about how we can work most effectively to achieve our aims – they have been our trailblazers, and their legacy begins now

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

ABOUT THE FETL FELLOWSHIPS

In September 2014, FETL announced applications for its first structured Fellowship programme. This aimed to give current leaders (at all levels) in the FE & Skills sector the time and space to explore an interest of passion, and to research it thoroughly in a manner that ensured academic credibility.

This short summary report brings together the findings and approaches of the 2015 FETL Fellows. The inaugural Fellows were drawn from a range of different institutions across Further Education and Skills, and each worked on a project with a distinct focus.

Ruth Allen, development manager at The Cornwall College Group, looked at how to foster a creative culture within a further education college. Ann Creed, an independent consultant working with the Workers' Educational Association, examined leadership behaviours which support part-time tutors working in outreach settings. Alex Day, Director of Adult and Higher Education and Peter Symonds College (a sixth-form college in Winchester), researched risk behaviour among sixth-form leaders, and Tim Ward, Chief Executive of The Learning Curve and Chair of the Third Sector National Learning Alliance, studied the challenges facing leaders of third-sector learning providers.

Their work will add to the growing body of knowledge in the sector, introducing important new thinking about the future we are working towards, and how best to equip ourselves for the challenges and opportunities that it offers. FETL believes that the sector can secure its future only by making itself better understood and taking ownership of the leadership of thinking about further education and skills.

Thinking differently about FE and Skills

This concept of the leadership of thinking is new to many, and is still being honed by FETL's lines of enquiry. Understandably there is a more significant body of research on the practice of leadership than that available for a new (or newly articulated) concept. However, FETL's approach, as Dame Ruth Silver has pointed out in her introduction to this summary report, is not concerning itself with the leadership of doing – there are other excellent sources of support for this across the sector, and indeed the sector is well known for its abilities in this regard. FETL wants to offer the space, and develop the capacity, for thinking as a critical dimension of leadership – a dimension that too often gets squeezed out by the pressures of day to day management and delivery.

To do this, we need to create time for the leaders of our institutions to reflect and be creative. We need to support them to articulate where the sector needs to be in the future, thinking beyond immediate priorities and practice. What are the theories and approaches that can lead thinking in this direction? That is what FETL and its Fellowship programme are all about.

Our 2015 academic partner, the University College London Institute of Education (UCL IoE), have also reviewed the landscape of literature around some of the issues facing current and future leaders in the sector. This learning will help to scaffold the next round of FETL Fellows, and identify areas from which FE and Skills can learn, however seemingly unrelated.

Meeting the challenges to the FE and Skills sector requires new ways of seeing the issues: new metaphors, new mental models. Highly effective metaphors, theories, concepts or models can help navigate through the complexities. Through systematic enquiry, we can attempt to construct sensible questions, rather than pretend to provide answers. We are familiar with the requirement to be 'dual professionals' but this concept of a "split focus, between present realities and future possibilities, between individuals and teams, between organisations and systems" is not restricted to subject experts – current and future leaders also need to be aware of, and able to deal with, these opposing forces.

Developing the leadership of thinking requires new ways of conceiving the very term leadership. It is also important to identify other approaches from which we can learn, and these can take into account the many different perspectives of people and institutions invested in the sector. In drawing on these metaphors and in developing new ways of seeing, the aim is to provide an overall way of breaking down and representing the different elements and levels of the FE and Skills system and their inter-relationships. One such example is the work on adaptive leadership which, as UCL IoE notes, "calls for the development of 'next practice' rather than 'best practice'". This also includes useful perspectives on failure and, importantly, treating failure as a learning experience so that people and systems do not revert back to 'safe' methods of working.

This highlights just one approach to thinking differently about the shape and performance of the sector's leadership and management. FETL is working closely with its academic support partners to make sure that the breadth of research and debate on these perspectives is available to support future Fellows; and to offer routes to sharing the findings and outputs of the Fellows' research.

Future Fellowships

Overall, the Fellowship programme gave each Fellow an opportunity to think boldly and creatively about a personal passion or area of concern to the sector. They supported each other throughout the process in addition to accessing academic support in shaping and reshaping their work. All found the process to be hugely enjoyable as well as a valuable personal and professional experience. The end result is a rich set of data, diverse but with clear common themes, and a compelling set of recommendations capable of making a difference to further education, training and skills in the UK. FETL will continue to work closely with Fellows to ensure a strong legacy both for their work and for the Fellowship scheme.

Future Fellows might want to follow up some of the emerging themes of this first round of Fellowships – focusing perhaps on how leaders can create collaborative, creative workplaces in spite of the pressures of accountability, reduced budgets and restructuring, or on how the work of under-appreciated parts of the sector, such as third-sector providers, can be better recognised and understood – or examine another area altogether. However, it's a central part of FETL's working ethos that Fellows get to set the agenda.

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RUTH ALLEN



*FETL Fellow and Development Manager
for The Cornwall College Group*

Ruth Allen is Group Development Manager with the Cornwall College Group, a major provider of further education which comprises seven main campuses and four satellite sites, and attracts around 30,000 learners each year. Her research focuses on leadership strategies which 'foster a creative culture in further education', a critical issue in a sector in which pressures of policy turbulence and accountability make the creation of collaborative, imaginative workplaces particularly challenging.

'FETL gave me the freedom, time and space to sit back and think about how we can change things,' says Ruth. Her work began with a 'personal passion' about how people use their creativity in the workplace. How, she asked, could a creative culture be fostered within a further education setting, where policy turbulence and accountability pressures make the creation of collaborative, imaginative workplaces particularly challenging? Ruth adopted a collaborative approach which engaged staff in the process and ensured senior leaders were on board from the start. She uncovered a complex picture of the 'enablers' and 'disablers' of creativity. To foster a creative culture in an FE college, she concluded, a number of factors must be present, including a clear articulation of values and vision, a strategy in which all staff are stakeholders, and creative leadership styles, supported by leadership development programmes.

Ruth's research led to the development of a tool that can be used by colleges to assess their current creative capability. It has been well received by her college, with some of the recommendations already implemented. Ruth has been given space and time to continue thinking about creativity in the college. 'I aimed to supply something that didn't just talk about what creativity looked like but also showed people how they could change things,' Ruth says. 'I enjoyed the whole experience. I was lucky that the college gave me time and space to do it. It meant leaving my previous role to immerse myself properly in reading and engaging with staff and to feel I was giving something back, not only to the sector, through FETL, but to the college, which did a lot to support me. It was a really special thing to be able to do.'

HOW TO FOSTER A CREATIVE CULTURE WITHIN A FURTHER EDUCATION SETTING

Organisations worldwide are facing a common challenge: capitalising on the complexity that is increasing in both the public and private settings. Creativity has been identified as the most important leadership competency for organisations trying to seek a path through this complexity.

The stability of FE has been greatly impacted by these layers in the past three decades; changing governmental policy and shifting departmental responsibilities, lack of 'organisational memory' regarding past policies, the constantly changing skills debate, and lack of coordination and agreement of responsibilities between departments (City and Guilds (2014).

This paper explores what the indicators of a creative Further Education (FE) college are and how FE leaders can harness the creative ability of their staff in times of increasing complexity. Furthermore it seeks to identify cultural and practical indicators that might aid an FE college in determining and enhancing its creative capacity.

Creative leadership has been explored through styles of leadership that impact on the internal and external stability of an organisation, influencing both staff and stakeholders. And, how the structure, systems and processes all play a critical part in harnessing the creative talent of organisations employees.

Research Focus

The primary question was: "How to foster a creative culture in a further education setting".

This allowed the freedom and flexibility to consider perceptions of creativity within one institution, and how to enhance, or create, the culture the FE sector needs as a whole to challenge complexities.

Primary data was gathered from one FE college: The Cornwall College Group (TCCG). A collaborative research approach was used to engage staff in the process. In gathering primary evidence it was essential to explore the ways in which participants defined creativity, what they believed the enablers and disablers of creativity to be and their views on organisational creative cultures.

Methodology

Data was collected through an online survey open to all staff, which provided both qualitative and quantitative data. Four focus groups were held to gather further qualitative data. The focus groups had three elements. The first was to ask participants to consider photographs of global figureheads and select those perceived as having the necessary characteristics for leadership in FE. In the second element participants chose from provided words to construct sentences that resonated with TCCG. Finally a group discussion considered the enablers and disablers of creativity within the organisation.

An inductive approach was used to analysis the results of the survey. The survey response was insufficient (275 out of a population of 2000) to be statistically significant.

Key Findings

The results of this research correlated with the key findings of the literature review, exploring whether the challenges faced by the FE sector were similar enough to those outside of the sector in order to harness the practices and lessons learned from outside.

In order for an FE College to do this, the research found that they needed to focus attention on the following areas:

- The articulation of values and vision: In order to have creative ideas that will drive the organisation in the right direction, understanding where the organisation wants, or needs to go, is critical.
- The 'College', its vision and strategy should not be the result of one 'ego'; everyone in the locality of the college is a stakeholder, whether they work or learn within it or not. Involving these stakeholders in the creation of a vision is a straightforward process and can be critical if the vision or strategy will ultimately lead to change. But after the creation, regular feedback to stakeholders on how we are delivering is just as important. It is a story to tell.
- The creative leadership styles demonstrated and valued by all within the hierarchy of management, supported by leadership development programmes. Understanding that in order for the creative process to work different skills sets are required, helps teams to see ideas into fruition and reduces risk of a covert bias towards creative ideas.
- Proactively engaging staff to solve problems or respond to opportunities, further embeds the strategy and vision of an organisation at all of its levels and this engagement shouldn't be the domain of the senior management team.

- Awareness (and the facilitation of) that individuals respond to different stimuli, and that the majority need a mix, will increase creative output.
- The creative process requires differing skills-sets and talents and staff therefore need to be able to identify and access each other on this basis. The formal bringing together of staff is easy to manage and most colleges will engage staff through corporate events or training days. However, with time at a premium, creating an informal way for staff to access each other, based on skills and talent, is an investment worth making.
- The need for systems and processes that allow staff to take ideas forward that articulate with the Colleges vision and with speed, to allow timely response to opportunities or problems.
- The need for feedback, integration and results awareness: demonstrating the value that the college places on ideas generation and sharing of ideas and practice.

Outcomes

This research offers an insight into how to foster a creative culture in a Further Education setting. In times of stress it can be tempting, and easy, to revert to a command and control style of leadership. However as this research has demonstrated, by embedding a culture of creativity with in an FE setting, the capability of an organisation to steer its way through, and even capitalise on the complexity, is much improved. By doing so, those working in FE can impact positively on their local learning ecology, driving organisational evolution for the benefit, and wellbeing, of all stakeholders.

This research has led to the development of a tool that can be used by colleges in order to assess their current creative capability and therefore help them identify where they can make improvements.

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ANN CREED



*FETL Fellow and Independent
Consultant working with the Workers'
Educational Association*

Ann Creed is an experienced researcher with strong roots in community education. She describes herself as 'an enthusiastic advocate of lifelong learning who has seen the positive impact learning can have on individuals, families and communities'. Recently this has included working as part of the national quality team for the Workers' Educational Association and undertaking field research in India for Seva Mandir, an educational charity.

Ann's study examined how leadership styles and behaviours affect the attitudes and wellbeing of part-time tutors in outreach settings and impact on delivery in the classroom. Crucially, she wanted to give tutors a clear voice in debates about leadership in the sector. A series of semi-structured interviews with teachers and leaders highlighted the critical importance of 'mutual trust and cooperation', both in terms of teacher wellbeing and the quality of the learning experience. 'Those were viewed as the deal breakers in making the relationship between leaders and teachers work,' Ann explains. Too often, though, teachers felt their work was too little valued and that, in contrast to the level of attention given to individual students, there was little understanding of their different needs. Most tutors had been through restructuring, a process which had caused confusion as well as extra work. Many had experienced poor leadership, highlighting a lack of communication as a particular issue.

'There is still a lack of satisfaction among outreach tutors with leadership,' Ann says. 'What I've done is to try to represent their views and not make judgements myself. There is very little evidence about what teachers think about anything, but particularly leadership. This clearly articulates their thinking in a way that has not featured in an academic study before.' The Fellowship gave Ann the space and financial support she needed to conduct in-depth interviews in a variety of settings, travelling the country to get a genuine breadth of responses. 'The opportunity to take time out and approach the research in a different way was invaluable,' Ann says. 'Without funding from FETL for my time and my expenses that wouldn't have been possible.'

'IT'S THAT TWO-WAY PROCESS ISN'T IT?' PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOUR BY FURTHER EDUCATION AND SKILLS TEACHERS EMPLOYED PART-TIME TO WORK IN OUTREACH LOCATIONS.

This research examines relationships between part-time Further Education (FE) and skills teachers employed in outreach settings and their leaders. It uses a qualitative approach to explore teachers' experience and perception of leaders in order to identify the styles and behaviours they prefer and recognise has having most impact on their practice and personal wellbeing. A research focus on the views of FE teachers is under-developed and minimal reporting 'from the ground' limits sector perspective; a clearer identification of significant leader behaviours may help influence the future direction of practice.

Research question

The research question was: do leadership styles and behaviours impact on the attitude and wellbeing of part-time teachers in outreach locations and the quality of teaching and learning that takes place?

Method

The research design, informed by the understanding researchers are never value-free, recognised a process of negotiation with, and learning from, interviewees. It relied on participant self-selection and was restricted to the first 10 teachers who fulfilled the purposive sample criteria. A semi-structured interview script and a card sort activity helped prompt and thematically link interviewee reflections.

Interviews were transcribed and re-read several times to identify natural division into key themes. The emerging findings were triangulated with the literature review and findings from interviews with two strategic and two operational leaders of part-time outreach staff to identify congruence and insights into practice.

Key findings

Teachers who work autonomously in outreach locations need commitment, self-discipline and confidence in their teaching abilities. They develop and sustain self-efficacy through interaction with students and the leader they select to complement the 'two-way process' that satisfies their professional values. This relationship, built on mutual trust and co-operation, varies in significance to individuals but is fundamental to teacher wellbeing. The physical environment and other leadership roles are tangential to the complex ecologies of teacher-learner-leader interactions. This is not to suggest virtual or face-to-face peer interaction is insignificant, but highlights how, in outreach locations where that dimension is absent, teachers perceive leader behaviour as crucial.

Organisational change, whilst accepted as inevitable given funding cuts, caused teachers confusion and extra work with frequent modification of IT, quality or data collection systems and re-structuring of staff job roles. Specific examples of change with significant negative impact cited by different interviewees included a churn of senior leadership; long term absence of Operational and Line Managers; redundancy notices without warning for a whole outreach team and the de-motivating impact of seeing colleagues and leaders leaving in tears following dismissal.

Leader styles and behaviours interviewees identified as being significant to their wellbeing and effective practice included:

- Focused on students their progress and outcomes
- Understanding teaching and learning so you can engage with the personal development of staff
- Inclusion, valuing diversity and respect

- Empowering staff to innovate and take risks
- Working outside your organisation to create and develop networks and partners
- Developing people
- About trust
- Co-created by everyone and based on collaboration
- The ability to shape shift to meet changing contexts
- Thinking 'outside the box'.

However leadership behaviours observed, whilst congruent on the majority, were divergent in four areas: trust, collaboration and co-creation, the ability to shape shift and thinking outside the box. This dissonance was explored in further discussion and two deal-breaker leader attributes emerged: trust and co-operation. If these were present other challenges related to outreach or part-time working had diminished influence.

Interviewees defined trust as their belief in the honesty, veracity and moral courage of a leader and his or her implicit confidence in their personal values and professionalism. They expected leaders to show appreciation of their knowledge, ability and experience by allowing them to work flexibly and have a level of belief in their capabilities which gave them the freedom to exercise their own judgement and be respected rather than reprimanded for taking the initiative. They wanted leaders to share their values, motivation and ability to develop and sustain effective relationships with students, colleagues and partners.

Co-operation, also described as consistent support, was identified as leaders employing a range of practical skills to enable interviewees to meet the needs of learners. Specifically, interviewees wanted leaders to demonstrate respect for the multiple challenges of a part-time outreach role. This included being as flexible as they were if personal circumstances temporarily affected their ability to work and responding quickly to a specific query since it would only ever be significant given their day-to-day autonomy. They preferred leaders to be decisive and delegate authority with clear instructions and motivate them by taking a problem solving, 'can do' approach.

There was a decisive link identified by interviewees between leader attitude, the impact on personal wellbeing and the quality of the student experience. Leader effectiveness in promoting high quality learning was not just about practical resourcing but how leader behaviour influenced teachers' personal self-esteem and confidence and the development of their professional practice. Reported disengagement of some leader roles from pedagogy to a focus on 'data crunching' and ensuring teacher compliance with organisational requirements was routinely criticised.

Interviewees did not recognise themselves as informal leaders; leadership was associated with acquisition of a formal job role with organisational status or recognition which was not always attractive to them. They found it hard to understand why reciprocal trust and co-operation is not considered as fundamental behaviour for all leaders rather than an optional extra which their collective experience over many years suggests.

Recommendations

Given the rigid fiscal framework the sector will work in over the coming years the need to maximise the potential of all staff is imperative.

Identifying organisational issues and influencing change in leadership culture is a transformative, developmental process and there are no quick fixes. The sector's self-assessment review process could provide a practical starting point for discussion about leader/teacher culture if an open, honest dialogue can be assured. Externally funded research related to teacher leadership in the context of FE; teacher wellbeing; and teacher perceptions of leadership, which could test and progress the findings of this report, would provide more robust information to inform sector decision-making.

3

ALEX DAY



*FETL Fellow and Director of Adult
and Higher Education at Peter
Symonds College*

Alex Day has led the adult and higher education division of Peter Symonds College in Winchester for seven years – a period during which funding has been consistently cut and institutions have been under significant pressure to diversify sources of funding. The experience has sharpened her interest in risk and led her to develop a Fellowship proposal to explore attitudes to risk among leaders in sixth-form colleges, particularly in relation to the diversification of income streams. Her work seeks to identify the barriers to risk-taking and the interventions that might support planning and risk calculation when considering diversification. This is something Alex knows a great deal about. She has been awarded an MBE for her work in diversifying funding for her own division, developing higher education so that, uniquely, her college writes its own degrees. Her work, which has involved both ingenuity and the careful assessment of risk, has resulted in a 25 per cent increase in income for the division.

'It was exciting to be one of the first FETL Fellows,' Alex says. 'It was great to be involved in shaping something for the future, particularly when it's so important in terms of developing independent thinking.' Alex examined risk behaviour among sixth-form college leaders and how it impacts on decision-making. It was a difficult topic but she had two strokes of luck. 'The first was finding out a consultancy had put together an online psychological test for risk type and risk attitude, which I was able to use. The other breakthrough was finding that an internationally renowned expert on risk, lived 15 miles down the road from me. I was able to meet with him and talk through what I was doing in my research. He helped me refine some of the questions I put to leaders.'

Alex's findings pointed up the need for a 'culture shift' in thinking about risk in further education towards seeing it as an opportunity rather than a threat. Colleges, she argues, should adopt a risk and opportunity management process which incorporates both. 'The risk management process could be a barrier towards creating a more entrepreneurial culture in our colleges. If we can't create an entrepreneurial culture in our colleges, with hundreds and thousands of young people coming through our doors, how do we ensure we have an entrepreneurial culture in society.' Alex found the opportunity to work closely with the other Fellows and with the FETL team particularly rewarding. 'I have a tremendous appreciation for their different skills and it has been really enriching to hear their different perspectives. I hope I'm going to be part of it in the future. I'd like to give something back and connect with the organisation as it grows.'

RISK TYPES AND ATTITUDES AMONGST LEADERS IN SIXTH FORM COLLEGES – A CASE STUDY.

The effective management of any organisation requires good decision making. How decisions are made and the rules which drive it are often nebulous making them "difficult to define and replicate" (Atkinson 2013) as leaders, risk and uncertainty play a role in almost every decision we make. There is considerable documentation regarding risk management and the processes attached to it. However, risk behaviours have yet to be explored in the educational setting. A better understanding of the concept of risk and how to manage risk behaviour should, in theory, help leaders make better decisions.

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this research is to identify the factors which influence risk behaviour and then use this information to explore risk in sixth form college leaders. It will also attempt to identify some tools to help manage risk attitude and ensure objectives are not compromised by in appropriate risk attitude.

- a) What are the risk behaviours of leaders in sixth form colleges?
- b) What are the barriers to risk taking?
- c) What interventions might help planning and risk calculation when considering risky projects?

Methodology

A case study approach has been adopted with a total of nine sixth form College Principals being interviewed and completing the Risk Type Compass assessment along with one chair of Governors and nine other senior managers. It was possible in one college to obtain Risk Type Compass results for all members of the senior management team. There are 93 sixth form Colleges in total so this research covers about 10% of colleges and therefore further completion of the Risk Type compass assessments would be needed before any statistical significance can be attached to the results.

Risk behaviour is a combination of an individual's risk type and risk attitude. Therefore a tool called the Risk Type Compass, an online psychometric assessment is being used which aims to capture the distinguishing ways in which we behave in risk orientated situations. Initial participants were selected using a purposive sampling approach so as to reflect the diversity of college's in the Sixth Form sector. In order to get a cross sample of "typical" colleges in the sector leaders were identified by the Sixth Form College Association (SFCA).

In addition to completing the Risk Type Compass assessment, each Principal was interviewed using a semi-structured approach. The questions were designed in discussion with Dr David Hillson, a recognised global authority on risk. The participants were provided with feedback on the Risk Type Compass Survey and a personal report on the interviewees risk type and current risk attitude was shared with them.

Additional senior college managers (nine in total) were also asked to complete the Risk Type Compass assessment using a convenience sampling approach in order to obtain wider information about the risk behaviour across the senior managers in the sector.

Key Findings

Very few leaders would be prevented from taking a risk due to concern about their personal reputation if taking the risk failed. They are more likely to be prevented from taking a risk if by the financial implications or likely impact on the college's reputation. Where significant risks are being taken they are very thoroughly researched even by the most adventurous risk takers.

Although risk type is relatively stable over a lifetime the fact that risk attitude can be managed is of particular interest in terms of leadership because it provides illumination of how decisions are made and an opportunity to proactively manage decision making in uncertainty through a structured framework.

No one risk type emerged amongst the college leaders interviewed. There were no leaders in the "excitable" risk type although given the size of the sample it is difficult to know whether this was by chance or whether it holds true across the sector.

Considering all respondents in this sample there is some apparent grouping for Principals v senior leaders with principals evidencing an inclination to be in more risk taking categories and senior leaders indicating they are in more risk adverse categories. This indicates that there tends to be a mix of risk taking types amongst college leaders. It may be that this results in a group dynamic which places a group of leaders in a particular college on the central axis area. This was the case where, in one college, all the senior managers for one college completed the survey. Their collective result placed the group in the axis area which indicates that members of the group tend to complement each other in terms of their reaction to risk and the overall disposition of the group towards risk-taking is well moderated.

Recommendations

1. The current risk management process means that even where leaders accept that risk management is about the threats and opportunities they maintain a focus on the threats and ignore the opportunities. Colleges should adopt a risk and opportunity management process as suggested by Hillson (2003) which incorporates opportunities as well as threats. This could ultimately help drive forward a more entrepreneurial culture in the UK.
2. To compensate for the current risk management process, which relies on probability and impact estimates, senior management teams should utilise the Six A's model when making risky decisions.
3. Colleges should define their risk appetite i.e. agree what level of risk is generally acceptable. They should be aware that there is no single "right risk appetite". The Board and Senior Management Team must make careful choices in setting risk appetite which centre around understanding the trade-offs between defining high or low risk appetites and this will depend significantly on the College, its history and culture.
4. A risk appetite which is too low will result in the college foregoing profitable opportunities because they are too risk adverse and a risk appetite which is too high may put the college at serious reputational risk and even threaten its continuance. Overall, colleges need to work towards a balanced portfolio of upside and downside risks.
5. Senior Management Teams and Boards of Governors should utilise the Risk Type Compass Survey to explore the underlying risk type of individuals and utilise the group report option to gain insight into how individual risk types interact in their senior management team or board of governors.

4

TIM WARD



*FETL Fellow and Chief Executive
of the Learning Curve*

Tim Ward is Chief Executive of The Learning Curve, a not-for-profit organisation focused on workforce and organisational development in the voluntary and community sector, and Chair of the Third Sector Learning Alliance, which supports voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) learning providers. He is a champion of the role of the third sector in delivering learning and skills provision, particularly for the most vulnerable and disengaged, and used his Fellowship to explore the challenges of leadership among third-sector providers and how to meet them. These are difficult times for third-sector providers, Tim explains. 'The position of third-sector providers in the publicly funded learning and skills system has been increasingly under threat. At one time, over 400 third-sector organisations held direct contracts with the Learning and Skills Council. Now there is barely 10 per cent of that number holding contracts with the Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency. Most third-sector providers now find themselves in insecure and sometimes asymmetric subcontracting relationships.'

For Tim, the freedom FETL gave him to reshape and adapt his research as he went along was particularly important. 'I started by asking what skills the leaders of third-sector learning providers need to do their jobs properly,' he says. 'I quickly realised that the interesting question was why the job was so difficult, and began looking instead at the challenges they face.' Tim's research painted a picture of a sector that did exceptionally well in reaching disadvantaged groups but that was poorly understood and, as a result, often suffered from the unintended consequences of policy in other areas. Although providers were meeting government objectives in 'getting people into work and enabling them to take more control of their lives', their leaders described 'a significant level of tension' between their 'mission priorities' and 'public policy and funding systems'.

'FETL were really good in allowing me not to be very precise in my research question,' Tim says. 'It was brave of FETL to allow me that space.' With leaders in the sector used to tailoring bids to specific, tightly defined purposes, and so much research intended to address pre-determined policy objectives, that open, critical and independent approach is, he says, 'a really good space to be'. 'Somebody needs to look at the FE sector and say, this is what it is actually like, not what we would like it to be, or what it should be. That's a big question and it needs to be asked by someone who is prepared to tell the truth.' For Tim, the research was also a chance to highlight a part of the sector that is under-appreciated and poorly understood. 'It's a topic I'm passionate about. It's important that the work of these organisations is recognised. It's important to tell that story.'

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF LEADERSHIP IN THIRD SECTOR LEARNING AND SKILLS

Context

Since the establishment of the Manpower Services Commission 40 years ago, there has been an increasingly centralised control of further education and skill training. Alongside this there has been move to 'marketisation' of learning and skills with an increasing proportion being contracted out to non-college providers directly or through subcontracts. Although the majority of these independent providers are commercial businesses, there is a small proportion of delivery by third sector providers.

Research Question

This study aims to understand the specific challenges faced by leaders of third sector providers and the factors behind these challenges. The research questions considered were:

- How third sector providers are different from other skills and learning providers
- Why this is important
- How the external policy and funding environment affects their ability to maintain this uniqueness

Literature review

In framing the research questions and research approach, I reviewed literature on the nature of the third sector, its role in public service delivery and the formation of learning and skills policy and administration.

There were several concepts or theories that were of particular relevance to the study:

- 'New Public Management' – increasing the role of markets in public service delivery
- 'Hybridisation' – the idea that organisations show characteristics of other sectors (e.g. caused by movement of organisations from the public and private sector into the third sector)
- Isomorphism – coercive or mimetic adoption by third sector organisations of characteristics of other sectors (e.g. business processes imposed by funders)
- How skills policy is determined and administered

Method

I decided to use a predominantly qualitative approach, because my reading convinced me that to understand the distinctiveness of the third sector required an understanding of subjective and socially constructed reality.

The research is based on semi-structured interviews with 15 CEOs of third sector organisations. I used SFA contract data to identify third sector providers and to gather data on the current level of funding going to third sector organisations. I identified a sample of 15 third sector organisations to interview using a purposive sampling approach.

Findings

The organisations were very diverse in their activities and in their organisational capabilities and history. However, all were successfully focussed on addressing the needs of disadvantaged and excluded individuals and communities.

There was a high level of similarities in their explanations of why they were successful in engaging and supporting these types of learners. In particular there was an emphasis on providing a friendly and supportive environment and in making consideration of the wider welfare and well-being of the learner an integral part of what they did. CEOs also emphasised the centrality of mission, values and of staff personal commitment and passion in shaping a suitable environment for disadvantaged learners.

In comparing themselves to other types of providers, there was a perception that their organisation could be more responsive and flexible and offer more individually-focussed support and learning. There was also a view that some learners needed alternative environments to mainstream because of lack of confidence or behavioural/attitudinal issues or just through the desire to exercise choice.

The common theme with all the interviews was that there was a significant level of tension between the needs and mission priorities that they addressed and public policy and funding systems. The degree of such tension varied according to the nature of their work and the type of strategies they adopted to deal with these tensions. Almost all felt that their work was not recognised and valued by policy-makers and administrators despite their conviction that their work was congruent with the overall priorities of getting people into work by acquiring skills and attitudes required by employers. There was a perception that increased centralisation over the last few years had aggravated this tension and lack of awareness.

It was too early to understand the impact of the new localism strategies on awareness but CEOs had mixed experiences. Most were doubtful that LEPs etc had any understanding of, or commitment to, their work with disadvantaged communities but there was at least one example of strong relationships with LEPs.

Interviewees did believe that their distinctive characteristics were not entirely exclusive to the third sector but that other types of organisational environments were less conducive to the approaches that worked best with disadvantaged individuals. There was also a view that not all third sector organisations shared the same qualities, for example they referred to private sector organisations setting up third sector subsidiaries predominantly as a market entry mechanism.

Discussions and Recommendations

My research suggests that current models and conceptualisations of the vocational learning and skills system do not take account of the work of these kinds of providers and that this is having a negative impact on their ability to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged and excluded. There is a real risk of losing a substantial part of this provision unless this is addressed. This is not just a social inclusion issue as these providers demonstrate the benefit of their work to employers and to the wider economy.

My recommendations in the report are that firstly the FE system is re-envisaged in a way that can support this important role. I believe that further research into the whole FE system as it is rather than as we imagine it would support this.

I also recommend that SFA and EFA consider how funding and management systems can be better aligned to the characteristics of these third sector providers to gain best value from the particular contribution they can make to the learning and skills agenda.

Finally I believe that it would be of great value to the whole sector if more research is undertaken to identify and capture the characteristics, value systems and behaviour which enable such third sector organisations to work so successfully with disadvantaged learners.

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