The Dichotomy of Leadership Culture in Further Education: A Practitioner’s Perspective

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Introduction
The role of a senior leader in any sector is complex and multifaceted. A principal in a typical Further Education (FE) college needs to develop broad operational and functional knowledge to run an educational institution which has the business of teaching and learning at its heart. A senior leader also needs to understand and be effective in managing finances, estates, data and human resources. Other sides to the work of a principal include building effective relationships with local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, local politicians, employer groups, MPs, sector skills bodies and academy trusts, community groups, the police and many other key stakeholders.

Most FE principals and senior leaders would agree with the above descriptions of their busy role. The key point is that all of these responsibilities are focused on the individual institution and are concerned with how a college operates and interacts with its local environment. There is a larger question about leadership of the sector as a whole and how it operates and interacts at a national level.

The need for FE Sector-wide leadership
The broad mission of the FE sector is to enable communities to thrive, individuals to develop and succeed, local economies to expand, social mobility to become a norm,
community cohesion to be a reality, intergenerational relationships to be cohesive, societal attitudes to change and communities to become welcoming and accepting. Our communities and our economy need an effective FE sector. This is even more true with the advent of Brexit.

As with any sector, further education needs to operate in an environment which is conducive to fulfilling its mission. This environment spans many spheres of society, government, policy, regulation and funding. Unfortunately, the current environment does not allow FE to succeed. The sector needs to recognise the need for a more conducive operating environment and, crucially, it needs to take a lead role in creating it.

There are essentially two different approaches to creating a better environment for the FE sector and enabling it to fulfil its mission. One is for individual colleges and leaders to continue seeking to influence policy makers and key stakeholders such as regulators to create such an environment. The other is for the FE sector to take a leadership role in creating and articulating such an environment and inviting policy makers, regulators and other key stakeholders to be part of its development.

The advantages of the former approach are that the FE sector will not need to do the work of creating the environment. It will not need to change the way it has conducted itself and leaders will continue to react to requirements imposed by policy makers and regulators. However, the disadvantages are that there is no indication that policy makers and/or regulators are aware that such a change in environment is needed. This issue is not new; Prof Martin Doel, FETL Professor of Leadership in Further Education and Skills (2018) reports that issues pertaining to technical education and training policy and the clarity of its mission can be traced back to the 1940s, as does Sir Andrew Foster in his review of FE (2005). In my view, if we continue to work the way we have always done, the leadership discourse in FE will not have the opportunity to form and be acknowledged as the leading voice on what FE stands for; it will remain institution-centric and limited (Keep, 2006; Gleeson et al., 2015).

The latter however, will enable the FE sector to develop its ‘sector leadership’ discourse in a way that is pronounced and meaningful. It will have to balance its institutional leadership duties and expectations with those that are needed across
the sector to fulfil the sector mission. Sector needs might not align with institutional needs at every point—and they might also present a disadvantage to one or more institutions—but it would have a clear advantage across the sector as a whole.

Sector-wide thinking is a completely new way of working. Practitioners, policy makers and academics have identified this in the past as an issue that stands in the way of effective technical education and training (Doel, 2018; Elliott and Crossley, 1997; Foster, 2005; Keep, Mayhew and Payne, 2006). However, it is a new way for sector leaders to conduct themselves and view their roles. It will also be a whole new way of thinking for Governors in recruiting and performance managing principals and senior leaders.

This is not to say that there are not sector leaders in the current climate or in the past who have not done some profound and successful work to help advance the purpose of FE—although at the risk of missing one or more important names, I will not list any! However, the point here is that ‘sector leadership’ is not about one individual or a small group of leaders who feel the need for such discourse and indeed work to help make it a reality; it is more about the whole of the sector taking responsibility for the sector as an integral part of its leadership discourse. Though I see this as a leadership failure, I do not see it as the sole failure of sector leaders.

It seems that ‘sector leadership’ has largely been absent for as long as the sector has existed. This vacuum can trace its origins back to the time of college incorporation. The neoliberal policy discourse, which suggested that market forces and competition would help create a skills ecosystem that would meet the needs of the economy and society, did not deliver on its promise. Colleges were incentivised to put themselves before the needs of the sector as a whole and, as a result of incorporation, a collegiate and cohesive sector was never formed. It is frankly inconceivable that the FE sector has managed to operate for almost three decades without a meaningful platform on which to form its voice and its view on how it should operate as a collective—rather than a disparate—group of colleges.

The vacuum in sector leadership has, in my opinion, contributed to further education’s continued neglect. Commentators have identified the need for the sector to have a defined mission, a purpose to exist (Doel, 2018; Foster, 2005). The sector’s reaction is to agree, but there is no follow through with an action plan and a
road map for such definition. It seems the FE sector is waiting for somebody to tell it
to do so! In fact, at the Reimagining Further Education Conference 2018, Prof Matt
O’Leary questioned whether the FE sector is actually a sector. I recall thinking at
that time what an accurate perception that is.

This issue must not be confused with the work that many FE leaders do on the
national policy front. This work, including taking part in government-commissioned
reviews, is in the main good and contributes a great deal to FE. Sir Frank
McLoughlin’s (2014) Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning is a
case in point and has had a positive impact on policy.

However, while there are some good and effective voices in the sector, a cohesive
sector voice is, in my judgement, absent when it comes to important matters such as
skills policy, productivity, education reform, funding settlements and community
cohesion. There are, of course, sector voices, but what is lacking is an overarching
FE sector voice that would make the it the “go to” authority, actively sought out by
politicians and policymakers. For the FE sector to find its voice, joint working on the
issues facing it must become the norm.

All too often, a sector-wide view is thwarted by the leadership dichotomy. Being a
“sector leader” doesn’t always sit comfortably alongside the responsibilities of
leading an individual college. Being a college principal involves working to raise its
profile, and competing with rival institutions for learners, employer initiatives, growth,
business, international links and so on. Being a sector leader, on the other hand,
means working collaboratively on national policy initiatives. This can include
challenging and shaping policies that might bring benefits for the sector, the
economy and the country as a whole - but which might impact negatively on one’s
individual college.

This awkward reality needs to be acknowledged and accepted if the FE sector is to
take a lead in resolving national policy issues and implementation. Matters relating to
economic growth, skills challenges, productivity challenges, in so far as they relate to
skills and training, need to be led by the FE sector. This role can have a profound
impact on our economy, our communities and on the way further education is treated
and rated by policymakers, employers, the community and our learners. This role
can and will have a profound impact on the morale and self-esteem of staff in the
sector. It will also impact the way technical and vocational education training is perceived by parents and communities. In fact, I would argue that this ‘sector leadership’ can have more of an impact on parity of technical education with academic education than making exams harder and more difficult to pass, which seems to be the current agenda of policy makers.

It is time for a re-think. It is incumbent upon FE sector leaders to move beyond institutional self-interest and recognise that, by working together in the best interest of the whole sector, we have an altogether more important role to play. The current policy context for the FE sector does not encourage us, nor indeed require us, to work collaboratively in a way that makes sector change a more profound aspect of the work of its constituents.

**What would sector leadership look like…?**

Sector leadership is about having an acknowledged and well-articulated sector voice, where the whole sector owns unified and well-informed views on key elements of its work, be it policy, regulation or delivery. Sector leadership would have ground rules for all sector leaders to abide by; for example, individuals or groups would work vigorously in favour of a view or a set of views but once the sector view had been articulated, then all would have to work within it.

The sector would need to think carefully and diligently about the opportunities that commissioning evidence-based research can offer. Much of FE practice—though hugely effective—is not informed by research. Without a sufficient evidence base, FE efforts to challenge regulators is undermined. Commissioning research by FE and for FE can inform not only our teaching practice but also contribute towards developing an evidence base for all aspects of our sector, including areas such as management, funding and strategic decision-making. FE should encourage and support practitioners at all levels to formulate its views based upon good quality research as a matter of strategic and urgent need, not as a nice-to-have. This would enable the sector to work across the policy and regulation paradigms and inform future changes in a mature, confident and robust manner.

One way to deliver such targeted research is for FE to work collaboratively with its HEI partners to develop research initiatives which are sustainable and meaningful. FE organisations could commit a small amount, perhaps 0.2% or 0.3% of their
annual budget, to nurturing and sustaining research that focuses on FE-defined goals.

The sector will have the opportunity to lead, or significantly impact, how education and training can influence such agendas as closing skills gaps in their localities, contributing directly to business growth and prosperity, improving productivity and reducing levels of deprivation (especially educational), and contributing directly and tangibly to improving community cohesion. A sector with robust leadership and vision could reduce reoffending rates, improve the independence of young people with profound and multiple disabilities, empower people to deal with mental illness and similar debilitating conditions, and improve productivity, in addition to many other important aspects pertaining to the FE sector mission.

It is not inconceivable for the FE sector to have a view and be the ultimate authority on any of the following agendas and more:

- The ability to explore alternative means of measuring how FE targets local issues, such as skills, education and training, and the impact the FE sector has upon them, be it social, economic or other key challenges. This can have a profound and tangible impact on the way the sector works and the way it is funded and regulated (Hadawi and Crabbe, 2018).
- The ability to explore alternative means to deliver teaching, learning and assessment in FE which would have a direct impact on vocational pedagogy and in turn on the way the FE sector is regulated (Orr, 2013; Crabbe et al., 2015; Gleeson et al., 2015)
- The ability to explore a means to challenge existing methodologies for regulation and to propose more appropriate alternatives (Keep, 2006; Gleeson et al., 2015; Hadawi and Crabbe, 2018)
- The ability to explore a means to challenge existing funding methodologies and to propose alternatives within the same funding envelope (Elliott and Crossley, 1997; Keep, 2006; Keep, Mayhew and Payne, 2006)

I believe that the FE sector can have a profound impact on any number of societal and economic challenges if it were to form and operate as a cohesive sector. If and when further education decides to do so, it will have the opportunity to influence,
challenge and propose the kind of changes that will not only impact the sector in a positive way but also the communities which the sector exists to serve.

**References:**


