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**NEW BLOOD: THE THINKING AND  
APPROACHES OF NEW LEADERS IN  
THE FE AND SKILLS MARKET**

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# ABOUT FETL

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**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.

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# ASSOCIATION OF EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING PROVIDERS (AELP)

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**Founded in 2002, the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) is the leading trade association for vocational learning and employment providers in Britain.**

The majority of its 770 members are independent, private, not-for-profit and voluntary sector training and employment services organisations. Membership is open to any provider committed to quality provision and it includes over 40 FE colleges involved in work based learning. AELP members deliver over 70% of England's 872,000 apprenticeships, and are also at the forefront of Work Programme, Traineeship and Study Programme delivery.

**Website: [www.aelp.org.uk](http://www.aelp.org.uk) Twitter: @AELPUK**

## 157 GROUP

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**The 157 Group is a forward thinking membership organisation which represents 32 leading UK colleges and college groups ([www.157group.co.uk](http://www.157group.co.uk)). 157 Group colleges, in collaboration with others, are transforming the UK economy through the delivery of high-quality technical and professional education.**

**We achieve this through:**

- Partnerships with employers to co-create and deliver high quality and relevant professional and technical skills.
- Thought leadership in the areas of professional and technical skills, policy implementation and sector funding.
- Providing transformative leadership in the education sector.
- Providing learning environments which support enhanced technical, professional and other skills so learners are ready for work.
- Taking a leading role in shaping the future skills needs to ensure the long-term economic capacity of the UK economy.

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# FOREWORD

## Dame Ruth Silver – President

*Further Education Trust for Leadership*

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**Further education and skills is a challenging area in which to lead. Change and adaptation are part of our DNA. Policy turbulence is a constant and we have become experts in responding to it. But what is, in many respects, a significant virtue, can also hold us back, preventing us, as a sector, from being all that we can be. It can be tempting for leaders to focus on the day-to-day demands of curriculum change and shifting policy and accountability requirements, or to revert to tried-and-tested coping strategies to keep their organisation afloat in difficult times. Too often, though, these strategies are not fit for purpose, while constant adaptation to external change, however resourceful, can stop us recognising the drivers of that change and responding to them.**

Doing is important, of course – we are often seen as the 'doers' of the education system – but just as important, in leadership, is the capacity to think, to reflect on and anticipate change, and, where possible, to lead it. Most senior leaders in FE and Skills, charged both with leading learning within their organisation and leading a learning business, recognise this. One of the spurs for me in setting up the Further Education Trust for Leadership was the frequent observation of colleagues that, caught up in this frantic cycle of demanding change, simply had no time in which to think. With the government's programme of area reviews and the trend towards greater devolution likely to reshape the sector in quite a fundamental way, the need for us to think, and to think in new and different ways, has never been more acute. As I have written before, while the sector must understand where it has come from and where it is now, our rapidly changing context demands that we look 'elsewhere and everywhere' in forging a future for ourselves.

This research, an outcome of FETL's 2015-16 grants programme, explores one way in which we might do this: by recruiting 'new blood' in the form of leaders from outside the sector who bring with them fresh leadership

styles and approaches. Many colleges and independent training providers are already doing this. There is a clear trend among providers to look beyond FE and Skills in recruitment, whether to address a particular need of the institution, to give it a 'more commercial edge' or simply to broaden the skills base and stimulate new thinking. There is, however, little data on the extent of this trend, and little understanding, to date, of its impact. This paper is important because it demonstrates clearly the benefits of recruiting leaders from outside FE and Skills, while also offering guidance on how best to recruit, support and maximise the impact of these new leaders, both within the institution and more widely. Just as important as injecting new blood into the system is ensuring it circulates freely.

Learning from others is perhaps the leading theme of the paper. We should all be open to new ways of thinking about and doing things, yet, all too often, as the authors note, new ideas can meet with resistance. This is perhaps understandable, particularly when these new ideas are coming from outside the sector, from people with little, if any, experience of FE and Skills. Some will argue that those who understand the sector best are those best-placed to lead it, and there is merit in that view. The problem is that if we rely solely on the sector to generate ideas our thinking may stagnate. That is why I stress the importance of looking 'elsewhere and everywhere' for new ideas and approaches. Of course, we need to be able to understand and interpret the culture we work in, the politics of the sector, and the latest set of rules concerning funding or curriculum. But we should also be bold enough and brave enough to believe we can lead by learning from the thinking of others. This study shows that recruiting from outside the sector can be successful in introducing new thinking and, crucially, changing the ideas, work patterns and approaches of others.

It is this kind of leadership of thinking – leaders encouraging and developing thinking among colleagues, creating a reflective, critical and collaborative workforce – that FETL was set up to promote. But, of course, this sort of leadership doesn't just happen by itself. Leaders need time and resources to think, to understand the organisation they work in and its place in the wider world, and to develop new, robust and enterprising approaches that deliver the best outcomes for learners. The authors stress the importance of a 'well planned, extended induction' for leaders new to the sector. They also need to be given permission to challenge and invigorate, and, of course, to

ask 'daft questions'. It's important that this thinking is not done in isolation and that others are encouraged to contribute. There should be more opportunities for new and established leaders to share their experiences, not just within institutions but across FE and Skills, encouraging leadership of thinking in every part of the sector.

To get the right leaders into the sector, the authors argue, we also need to think harder about recruitment. This includes reviewing the information organisations give to candidates to ensure they attract someone with the right 'cultural fit': 'Too close and the potential to refresh the organisation may be lost; too far apart may cause too much disruption and a similar outcome.' It is important too, as the authors also note, that existing staff understand the reasons for non-sector recruitment, as well as for changes to the induction process. There is clearly a danger that resentment could be stored up if staff do not understand the need for new, independent thinking. Senior leaders too will need to work at challenging the tendency to appoint leaders 'in their own image'.

Changing approaches to recruitment and induction should be part of a wider culture shift within the FE and Skills sector. As the authors note, thinking remains 'generally undervalued' in FE and Skills. We need a better balance between thinking and doing, particularly if we are to identify and exploit the opportunities the changing climate in FE and Skills brings. Attracting new leadership talent, from both within and outwith the sector, needs to be part of this, and in many cases it already is. The case studies in the paper show the benefit of new blood in getting people to think differently about their work. Thinking that disrupts, that asks awkward questions, that challenges norms and sometime overturns them, shouldn't frighten us. It should be part of the day-to-day life and culture of every independent training provider and college.

Allow me to finish with a word of caution about fundamentals. Whatever their professional backgrounds or routes of entry to FE and Skills, the sector's new leaders must take acute account of, and be wise about, where the fulcrum of leadership is conjoined. At the core of leading in this system must be the recognition that senior colleagues, from the independent and college sectors alike, are both experts on learning and of organisation operations. Whoever leads in FE and Skills must be able to lead both the business of learning and the learning business.

# INTRODUCTION

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**This research project forms part of the FETL 2015/16 grants programme and was submitted jointly by AELP, the 157 Group, and Jean Kelly. Following project approval from FETL, work began in March 2015. The fieldwork was completed in March 2016.**

The project partners brought complementary expertise to the table. AELP's membership is predominantly made up of independent learning providers of various types whereas the 157 Group consists of some of the largest colleges in the UK. They share a common interest in the health and vitality of the FE and Skills system but have different perspectives and somewhat different concerns. A significant area of divergence from the point of view of this project is governance arrangements and the processes involved in recruiting and appointing leaders. By and large, college corporations work in similar ways in an organisational sense and in terms of accountabilities, albeit with some variations due to the different group and collaborative models that they adopt. Decisions on key appointments are made in similar ways. Independent learning providers take a wide range of different approaches reflecting their origins and ownership structures. They are more diverse in their decision making processes and the approaches that they adopt to the recruitment of their leadership teams. Most commonly research focuses on one part of the sector or another; the variety of different organisations involved here adds a different dimension to the work.

Jean Kelly's involvement has added an important independent perspective based on extensive experience in the sector, latterly as chief executive of the Institute for Learning.

The report which follows has a fairly traditional structure beginning with an executive summary followed by an outline of the original purpose of the work, the broader context that it is set in, and the research methodology that was used. The most substantial section then outlines the main findings, supporting these with a series of case studies.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## **There is a discernible, but as yet unquantified, trend towards recruiting more leaders from outside the FE and Skills sector into leadership roles in colleges and independent learning providers.**

In part, this appears to be a conscious response to the extent of the challenges that the sector currently faces and an accompanying recognition that new ideas and different ways of doing things will be required in order to respond effectively. This 'new blood' is fulfilling a wide range of different roles and is not confined to more obviously transferable areas such as finance and human resources. Whatever their background, and irrespective of their role in the sector, these new leaders are challenging existing orthodoxies and taking thinking off in new directions.

Despite this, some boards and senior figures still question the need for recruitment from outside the sector, pointing to the need for leaders to understand the culture, politics, rules and regulations, and myriad other things in order to be successful. This needs challenging if the leadership cadre is not to stagnate. If we are not careful we will simply continue to appoint people who are adept at solving yesterday's problems rather than facing up to the challenges of the future. Getting corporations and boards to think more broadly about leadership recruitment and to adjust their approaches accordingly seems like a high priority.

Although our sample is relatively small, it is clear that those recruited from outside the sector can be highly successful and can adjust relatively quickly to the different types of demands placed on them. In practice they tend to find that there is very little difference in the leadership skills required of them compared to their previous roles elsewhere.

Careful, well planned recruitment exercises which don't focus too heavily on sector knowledge, but clearly set out the expectations of the job role and the competencies required play a key part in making a successful appointment from outside. It is important that the provider is also clear

about the key challenges that their organisation faces; these may not be as immediately obvious to someone from outside the sector. The extent of the cultural fit between the individual and the provider is a significant factor. Too close and the potential to refresh the organisation may be lost; too far apart may cause too much disruption.

A well planned, extended induction is key. Even more so than with other recruits, those without sector experience need a clear framework and parameters to work within. The induction process also needs to provide opportunities to understand the broader sector as well as the organisation itself. To avoid misunderstandings, staff and key stakeholders need to be aware that new leaders have a remit to look at things in a different way, to be challenging, and to ask apparently naïve questions. And they, like all leaders, need to be given time out to think. Establishing the right balance between thinking and doing is crucial. This thinking time is a necessity rather than a luxury; but time for thinking still seems to be generally undervalued. Where they have maximum impact, new leaders make a conscious effort to lead and invigorate the thinking of others rather than just thinking in isolation. There is a crucial distinction to be made between simply consulting others and genuinely encouraging them to think creatively. At present however, there is less evidence of this type of leadership of thinking extending out to engage stakeholders and learners.

As time moves on it is important that new leaders retain their distinctive edge and don't get too easily socialised into sector 'group think'. Exposure to a wider group of sector leaders is, however, mutually beneficial. Newcomers can help to challenge and refresh the thinking of existing leaders whilst learning from their history and experiences. There is immense value to be gained from these exchanges.

## Matters requiring consideration

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### Leadership exchanges – peer learning

- Develop means of encouraging more engagement between new and established leaders, both within the different parts of the sector and pan-sector. This could be especially useful in developing leadership thinking for those in smaller organisations without an extended leadership team.
- Encourage more cross sector dialogue and working between leaders from different parts of the FE and Skills system. Participants particularly valued the opportunity to discuss issues and ideas with those who worked in different but related areas. This interchange appeared to trigger different types of thinking. It was suggested that this type of approach might work best on a regional basis.
- Develop a range of mechanisms to stimulate discussions around new and innovative approaches to the leadership of thinking. The on-line forum used by the project had limited success; face-to-face discussions worked far better. The key issue may be how to persuade people to commit time to this area in the first place; once engaged in the debate they appreciate the value and see it as time well spent.

### Recruitment and induction

- More applicants from outside the sector should be encouraged to apply for leadership roles in order to introduce fresh talent, provide challenge, and bring new thinking. A co-ordinated approach to sharing the experience of recruiting and supporting new leaders should be developed.
- Organisations should rethink the pre-interview advice and information that they provide so as to present a more complete picture of the role and their organisation to non-sector applicants. The extent of the challenges that the organisation faces should be articulated as clearly as possible.

- Organisations need to communicate the rationale behind non-sector recruitment clearly to staff. The type of role that an individual is expected to play needs to be explained carefully, especially where a significant proportion of thinking time is needed and significant change is expected.
- Organisations recruiting new leaders from outside the sector should consider an extended, bespoke induction period of up to 12 months to enable recruits to build up broader sector knowledge alongside their specific introduction to their own organisation. There is a similar type of arrangement for senior staff joining the NHS from outside the health sector.
- It is important that those leaders recruited from outside the sector retain their more independent perspective for as long as possible. They should be encouraged to continue to ask searching questions and to challenge the status quo.

### Research

- Further research and investigation would help us to better understand how the leadership of thinking is developing and the contribution that new entrants to the sector are making:
  - Investigate the extent of recruitment from outside the sector and levels of cross sector movement in leadership roles. We are not aware of any survey or other data that can provide a reliable insight into these issues at the present time.
  - To what extent, and how, learners and other stakeholders are being engaged in new thinking.

## Matters requiring further thought

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### Spreading the word

- Generate greater awareness of the concept of the leadership of thinking. This may require a slightly different, or layered ways of explaining what is meant by the phrase. Some found it difficult to conceptualise. The project found plenty of examples of individuals thinking in different ways and a good number of cases where individuals are trying to influence the thinking of their colleagues or organisations, but less examples where the net is cast wider, for example to stakeholders or learners.
- Find ways of building greater awareness of the leadership of thinking, and the need to strike the right balance between thinking and doing, into existing leadership development programmes. Leadership programmes should also build in content on the leadership of thinking as a possible tool for individual and organisational development.

# PURPOSE

**The project set out to investigate the impact that new leaders introduced from outside the traditional FE and Skills sector can have on the organisations that they join, and potentially more widely.**

In particular, we were interested in the extent to which people coming from outside bring fresh ways of thinking about things, and to what extent their different perspectives might influence the thinking of an organisation more generally. We also had some more specific questions about:

- How an individual's leadership thinking evolves in the first year of their position
- What leadership thinking is transferred from past experience or previous industries to the FE and Skills sector
- The similarities, mismatches and innovations in leadership thinking of external recruits as compared to established leaders in the sector

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

It is worth clarifying what is meant by the leadership of thinking. The project used the following description provided by FETL as its starting point:

'For FETL, the leadership of thinking is about how leaders encourage and develop capacity for thought in their people, and in the systems they work within. We believe that a key role of leaders of further education and training, at all levels, is to encourage thinking and debate amongst their colleagues about their practices, and with students and stakeholders about the world they enter and handle. This is about curiosity, encouraging discussions on difference, supportively questioning the status quo, and therefore is at the heart of great, progressive organisational performance especially in the pedagogy of vocational and technical education.'

As another FETL project<sup>1</sup> noted, the leadership of 'doing' is clearly important, but it almost inevitably means acting within existing paradigms rather than questioning, reshaping or creating new ones. The leadership of 'doing' is therefore insufficient on its own in today's constantly changing and unstable environment. We do need to be thinking about new ways of doing things, and encouraging others to do the same, but without being constrained by the current orthodoxies.

Leaders need to be thinking about the future; but thinking as a critical dimension of leadership too often gets squeezed out by the pressures of day to day management and delivery. We hope that this project will help to raise awareness of the need to maintain an appropriate balance between doing and thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> Working Well FETL Project; *How Can Psychoanalysis And Systems Theory Contribute To The Leadership Of Thinking In The UK FE and Skills Sector?*  
See [www.fetl.org.uk](http://www.fetl.org.uk)

# CONTEXT

**The FE and Skills system should be used to change by now, but somehow each new wave seems more intimidating than the last. And the waves are never simply confined to one part of the ocean. Nor is it always easy to see them coming when your time is taken up with the day-to-day challenges of leading a complex organisation.**

As in many other industries, most leaders tend to come from within; if not from within the same organisation then from one that is in a connected part of the sector. Movement from one college to another is common, and independent and third sector providers also recruit from each other and from colleges. College recruitment from these other parts of the sector seems less frequent. Of course, there have always been some exceptions, but by and large these patterns of movement have ensured that leaders can draw on an accumulated body of sector specific knowledge and experience. They know how things are done round here, and if they do change organisations they may only need to adapt to a different organisational culture and set of values; the doing part is fundamentally the same. Clearly, there are some significant benefits in this, particularly when the environment that you are operating in is relatively benign as was the case for many parts of the FE and Skills system in the period leading up to the 2008 recession. But there are also risks relating to the development of a type of sector wide 'group think' and a stifling of innovation. This can be problematic at any time, but especially so when times get tougher and there is a realisation that we need to start looking at things in a fundamentally different way if we are to be able to continue to provide the type of services that learners and employers need.

Research carried out by the Association of Colleges looked at the 'Leadership Pipeline'<sup>2</sup> and found that senior leaders and governors often recruit leaders 'in their own image' placing too much emphasis on traditional sector experience rather than on transferable leadership traits and qualities. This may mean that organisations are recruiting people who are adept at solving yesterday's problems rather than tackling what the future might bring. This isn't to say that experience and track record are a bad thing; but it does start to raise questions about whether we are maximising the chances of recruiting the people that can really make a difference.

Although there is no empirical evidence to back this up, it does seem that there is now an accelerating trend towards the recruitment of leaders from outside the sector: the 'new blood' that this research is interested in. It may be that we have now reached a tipping point; a more general realisation that we can't just keep doing things the same way and that we need fresh thinking and new ideas that aren't filtered by too much of our sector history.

What is it about the recent experience of the sector that has brought us to this point? Looking back, it may be that it has taken us too long to realise just how fundamental the waves of change have been, and how far reaching their implications. For colleges in particular, the financial pressures have been mounting for a number of years. Funding has reduced and competition has increased. Some have managed very well, but many have felt the strain. It is the extent and widespread nature of this strain that has brought the government to introduce its programme of area based reviews.

Independent and third sector providers will also be affected by the reviews, whether directly or indirectly, but they have significant concerns of their own. The whole apprenticeships policy and funding landscape is being fundamentally transformed, but in a rather piecemeal way, and at a time when there are ambitious growth targets to be met. The apprenticeship levy combined with funding reforms and the introduction of new standards will lead many providers to completely rethink their approaches.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.et-foundation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Leadership-Pipeline-Phase-2-final-report-.pdf>

With all this comes opportunity for those who are able to seize it; those who are able to think their way through in order to find creative solutions and previously unimagined ways of doing things. Many of our existing leaders have proved remarkably resilient and adaptable, but the need to look further afield to secure the talent that we need has arguably never been greater. An LSIS research report published in 2013<sup>3</sup> reached a similar conclusion, with many of its interviewees, all sector leaders themselves, feeling that there was a need to look outside for new leadership talent. For them this was a positive choice rather than pure expediency, expressed by one interviewee as follows, 'The sector would benefit hugely from an influx of new senior management talent with fresh perspectives to help shift the sector mind set, but this talent needs properly integrating and embedding.' Recruitment from outside the sector was not seen as an easy option, and a lack of such applicants was noted. This was attributed in part to the lack of a clear image of the sector and what it can offer, meaning advertised roles were not sufficiently understood or interesting to attract high quality applicants.

Another report<sup>4</sup> considered whether leadership in the FE and skill sector is really much different to leadership in most other settings; concluding that it is not in terms of fundamentals although there may be differences in emphasis. The similarities should make introducing new talent from outside less risky than it might at first seem. In this report, however, there was only a minority view that talent needed to be brought in from outside the sector to galvanise improvement and help the sector to reinvent itself.

Either way, new talent is being recruited, but we know very little about the extent of this or its impact. What actually happens to those who are recruited from outside? Do they make a distinctive contribution? This project explores specific dimensions of this wider picture: the innovative thinking of new leaders in the FE and Skills sector and the potential impact of facilitating exchanges in leadership-thinking between new and established leaders.

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<sup>3</sup> *Leading Learning Organisations: An Analysis of Leadership in the Further Education and Skills Sector*; LSIS 2013

<sup>4</sup> *Leading in volatile times: learning from leadership beyond the education and training sector* – IoE/London Centre for Leadership of Learning 2014

# PROJECT METHODOLOGY

## Identifying the sample

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**AELP and the 157 Group identified relevant organisations and possible participants using their own membership bases and networks, and through research into recent appointments across the sector as reported in the trade press and elsewhere. We were interested in a variety of different types of 'newness' to the sector, for example:**

- Leaders who had started to work for a training provider or college having previously worked in a different industry
- Leaders working in organisations that had recently expanded their scope of operations to include the delivery of government funded training
- Leaders working in newly established training providers

We aimed to create a sample that was broadly representative of the sector in terms of provider types, levels of leadership, types of job role, and previous leadership experience.

Once the sample had been identified the fieldwork for the project took place over a period of 11 months. The various stages are outlined below.

## Phase 1 interviews

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**A script aligned with the initial research purpose was drafted to allow AELP and the 157 Group to undertake one-to-one interviews with the sample of leaders that had been identified.**

The questions set out to identify the approaches and priorities of these new FE and Skills leaders and encouraged them to consider whether and how the demands made on them differed from previous leadership roles that they had undertaken. The questions then focused in on the leadership of thinking, the balance between thinking and doing, and the overall organisational culture in terms of thinking about leadership. We were also interested in attitudes to risk within organisations on the basis that this might affect the extent to which more radical approaches based on new thinking might be embraced. There were also questions about leadership development and specifically the development of the leadership of thinking.

A total of 21 interviews were undertaken by telephone by members of the project team between April and June 2015. Interviews were recorded using a standard template (see Appendix 1).

The main themes emerging from these interviews helped to shape the direction of subsequent stages of the research, in particular developing the focus for the round table events which took place in October 2015.

## Leadership of Thinking Exchange: round table events

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**At the core of the research process were two facilitated round table events which brought together some of our sample of new leaders with established leaders who had been in their roles for a considerable time.**

All of the first stage sample of new leaders were invited to participate. In addition the project team identified a varied range of established leaders who were also invited to attend.

These events allowed new leaders to draw on their past experience in other industries and to share innovative approaches and thinking about current leadership challenges in the FE and Skills sector among themselves and with longer established colleagues. Established leaders were able to add their own perspectives based on their more extended experience and knowledge of sector leadership.

Each round table followed a similar format with the new leaders meeting together with project team members in the morning to share their experiences. The main themes were:

- The FETL definition of leadership of thinking
- Leadership cultures: the ways in which the transition period for a new leader with new thinking could be facilitated most effectively
- Leadership communities: how best to share new leadership thinking with teams and individuals at different levels to ensure reach across the organisation
- Leadership of thinking development: identifying opportunities to extend, broaden and challenge the leadership of thinking

At the end of the morning sessions the key points were agreed by group members. Established leaders then joined for lunch, and at the beginning of the afternoon session the main themes from the morning were presented back and discussed. Further discussion centred around how established leaders might maximise and support the leadership thinking of the talent that they recruit, and how this area more generally might inform recruitment and retention processes. At the end of the session lessons learned, reflections and future plans were collected from participants. Those involved were also asked how they would prefer to be able to continue the discussion and debate on the leadership of thinking. Both round table groups expressed a preference for the formation of a dedicated LinkedIn group.

The round table events were held in Birmingham and London during October 2015, around 4 months after most of the first stage interviews had taken place. In total, 15 people attended, 8 of our original sample of new leaders and 7 established leaders. Of the 7 established leaders, 4 were from independent providers whilst 3 were from colleges. Three were chief executives or equivalent, 3 were senior HR professionals, and one was an operations director. Parts of the London round table event were filmed to provide footage for a video to help with the dissemination of the project. Five short individual interviews were also filmed.

The LinkedIn group referred to above was formed in November 2015.

## Phase 2 follow-up interviews

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**One important element of the research was to capture any changes in attitudes or behaviours related to the leadership of thinking during the course of the project. In order to do this the project team identified 12 leaders, both new and established, from those who attended the round table exchanges to take part in follow-up interviews. An additional interview was undertaken with an individual from the original sample of 21 new leader participants who had subsequently changed their job.**

The follow up interviews focused on the following areas:

- Any changes in practice or planning as a result of reflections following the earlier stages of the project
- The extent to which they had shared the idea of the leadership of thinking more broadly
- What value 'newness' has brought to the organisation; and the further impact that this might have
- How any barriers that had been faced had been anticipated and/or tackled

The follow up interviews took place during November and December 2015.

## Case studies

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**Following the second phase of interviews, the project team selected 5 of the participants and their organisations to be the subject of more detailed case studies.**

The case studies were designed to explore in greater depth the context of the organisation that the new leader was working in; how they have been supported in order to take thinking off in a different direction; and how the new leadership thinking and approaches gained from the exchanges have been cascaded down to staff at different levels. In addition to the participants three of the chief executives of the organisations involved were also interviewed in order to capture their perspectives and to gain some insights into the recruitment decisions.

## Reporting

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**The project has raised awareness about its work and reported its interim findings in a variety of different ways.**

Following the first stage interviews, a blog was posted in August 2015 to disseminate some of the initial findings and to encourage established leaders to become involved in the round tables. This was followed by a more extended think piece outlining some of the key points and accompanied by video clips from participating new leaders which was published in February 2016<sup>5</sup>. This was promoted through various Twitter feeds. The February 2016 issue of the AELP publication 'Sector Connect' also promoted awareness of the work.

This report is the main articulation of the findings from the work. A short video, available as a companion piece, outlines the purpose of the project and features excerpts from interviews with participants. This will be used to help disseminate the findings, promote the ideas surfaced by the project. We have also identified a number of associated areas that might benefit from further research.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.fetl.org.uk/blog/recruited-for-their-thinking-leaders-in-a-changing-fe-and-skills-landscape/>

# FINDINGS

## Development of the leadership of thinking

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**There does appear to be an increased focus on thinking about leadership as distinct from the 'doing' elements.**

There seem to be a number of different aspects to this: leaders, leadership teams and boards thinking about the direction that they should be taking their organisation in; attempts to engage a wider group or staff community in the thinking process; and collective thought across the sector about how it should define and position itself and much else.

This project has largely confined itself to the first two of these aspects although we have made some references to the third. In practice, our discussions and interviews which were originally focused on the second aspect, the leadership of thinking, have tended to blur into discussions about leadership thinking more generally. This was probably inevitable as the two are intertwined. Consequently we haven't maintained too fine a distinction.

In many organisations the focus on leadership thinking appears to be relatively new and responds to a recognised gap.

'As a leader, providing space for thinking, confidence and empowerment are fundamental for an organisation...at the moment we are drowning in "process". Space to think allows you to rationalise and move beyond the paperwork - to identify alternative ways of working'

Most interviewees felt that what they do and how they think are important in equal measure. Those brought into the business to bring about reform

felt that they were recruited for their leadership approach and thinking which would then, in turn, inform action and behaviour.

Developing their leadership thinking was seen as particularly important for those going through or anticipating significant change. The need to respond to the financial pressures in the sector over the last few years has acted as a stimulus, but there is little doubt that the area based review process has accelerated the trend. There has also been a recognition that all this can't simply be driven from the top. Our interviewees understood the value of encouraging staff who know best what needs to change, whatever their level, to present solutions.

It is difficult to uncover just how much training or development work there is about leadership thinking or the leadership of thinking. Elements of it doubtless exist in general leadership programmes, but few of our interviewees, particularly independent providers, reported any specific work within their organisations. This was recognised as a gap and interviewees were keen to address this, although for many of our participants the development of leadership thinking often came from experience and mentors rather than formal training. This probably provides some pointers as to how development might take place. There seems to be a link between this aspect and more general efforts to empower staff which need time to take full effect.

For some, the term 'leadership of thinking' felt rather abstract and academic and needed some unpacking. Few felt that it was a term that they would immediately take to using with colleagues. At an institutional level it would be more common to use terms such as 'thinking about things differently', or 'taking thinking off in a new direction', or perhaps the more hackneyed 'blue skies thinking'.

Discussions at the round table groups indicated that developing the leadership of thinking involved a gradual, subtle, conceptual process, which was sometimes invisible as it was taking place. This amounted to a cultural shift, and the result could be a more profound change in leadership behaviours. The power of this type of change cropped up on a number of occasions and there was a view that it is more likely to last than sudden changes of approach which are often unsettling and may be seen as faddish.

## Recruitment

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**Most of those in our sample had started in their new role in the 12 months prior to the beginning of the project. As such, the recruitment process was still relatively fresh in their minds and they were able to provide valuable insights into how those from outside the sector might be attracted and how the prospects of an effective appointment can be maximised.**

In some cases the recruiting organisation had deliberately set out to recruit someone from outside the sector. There were a number of reasons why this approach had been taken. Sometimes the motivation was to introduce more commercial types of thinking, often in finance, human resources, or business development types of role. In other cases the rationale was to help the organisation to get closer to employers as customers, and in doing so to introduce new approaches. Elsewhere, the intention had not necessarily been to recruit new blood, it had simply been the case that the person concerned happened to be the most suitable and appeared to have transferable skills.

Deciding to recruit from outside the sector is one thing. Getting people to apply is another. In some cases existing professional networks that cut across sectors play a part, and professional recruitment agencies are also able to introduce a broader range of candidates. The image and public perception of the sector is also significant; the scale, complexity and sheer scope of some colleges and providers and the opportunities that this can provide are not well understood. According to our sample, some quite simple things can help such as framing job titles in a generic rather than a sector specific way. There was also a general feeling that there would be benefit in a greater degree of movement between different parts of the sector, allowing thinking to cross-fertilise. There are examples of staff moving from colleges to independent or third sector providers, but apparently less movement in the opposite direction.

There was general agreement that leaders coming from outside particularly benefitted from having been given an honest appraisal of the position of the organisation that they were joining before they made a commitment. This was felt to be the best way of avoiding misunderstandings. In some senses the same applies to any form of recruitment, but those from outside will not always have the same levels of sector intelligence and may not be as well equipped to understand the nuances of different situations.

Overall, there was little perceived difference between the leadership skills required in the sector and those needed elsewhere. Especially in roles such as finance, human resources and IT the technical skills are also likely to be very similar. What will be missing from external applicants is the sector specific history and language. If we are to secure the best recruits we need to see past this and to develop a fully rounded recruitment process that takes just as much account of values and thinking elements.

There were also issues around cultural fit. This works both ways. The recruiting organisation needs to have worked through the implications of bringing someone in who has little or no basic knowledge of the sector and may have opinions or attitudes that differ from the norm – even if the intention is to disrupt established thinking or behaviours. Equally, the individual being recruited needs to work out whether they will be able to fit in. The general view was that both fitting in too well and being too different and unable to accommodate were both sub-optimal. In the first scenario the value of any difference is lost, whilst in the second positive change became less likely simply because others in the organisation were unlikely to be brought along on the journey.

It may be that concerns about cultural fit are part of the reason why boards and corporations have tended to be fairly conservative about the type of candidates that they have favoured. The current circumstances of the organisation probably also play a part. It isn't difficult to understand why those that are struggling would opt for sector experience, but on the other hand this may just lead to solutions that suited the past but will not work in the future. Recruiters do report an increasing receptiveness to candidates from varied backgrounds.

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## Case Study: The Manchester College – blending leadership teams and governance

The Manchester College (now part of the LTE Group) is one of the largest organisations of its kind in Europe. The Group has 5,000 employees working across more than 100 locations providing learning and skills to over 80,000 learners and 3,000 employers. The CEO of the LTE Group is John Thornhill and he has recruited two senior leaders in 2013 and 2014 both of whom have clear perspectives on how the college is using the leadership of thinking. Both took part in this project.

Mark Oldfield is the Director of Justice Development and started work at TMC in December 2014 having been recruited from Serco. At the outset, Mark experienced some challenges in his new role with 'long drawn-out decision making', but as he settled in 'was on a crusade to do things differently'. Mark's role has now been expanded to head up business development with responsibility across the whole group. With his sights set now on developing the business skills of not only his team but others in the college, he and others are deliberately looking outside the education sector for 'a different kind of employee' with a broader skills base and not recruited simply for specific subject knowledge. This changed focus has been accelerated by the introduction of area reviews and a far more commercially aware approach to the business of education.

However, this change to recruitment needs a corresponding change to induction and support for new leaders. One person Mark brought in has left already as they struggled with the culture in their team leading to frustrations they could not resolve. In Mark's opinion the college is changing the support for recruits new to the sector reasonably well; personally, he has been given enough leeway to make changes and accommodate his thinking.

Mark has considered the links between the leadership of thinking and the thinking behind business development and commented that senior leaders are now deliberately trying to organise diaries in order to give staff time

as he says to 'free up thinking'. This change has been received positively and Mark can see a real shift in the way the business is being run now.

Mark thinks that John Thornhill, CEO of the LTE Group, has taken the right approach at the right time and thinks changes to the governance model are crucial in this respect. All the business units in the college have a different governing body with appropriate expertise and focus. This shift in the governance model has been instrumental in the success of the whole Group.

Paul Taylor, Director of HR and People Strategy, started work at TMC in September 2013 having been recruited from Electricity North West Ltd. At the round table event and subsequently, Paul expressed some concern about the fact that the FE sector as he saw it 'had closed its eyes to what is happening with leadership development in the private sector'. His view is that the area reviews are flagging up the failure of leadership in many organisations in the sector. However, Paul was confident that the LTE Group was heading in the right direction in terms of recruitment and leadership development.

The decision to recruit the right person with the right skills for particular leadership posts had been a deliberate strategy by the CEO, but that did not necessarily mean that the organisation was looking always to recruit outside of the sector. They have looked outside for specific skillsets/roles (his own, Mark's, the IT director), but have also targeted great leaders from other colleges for the skills and knowledge that were required. In Paul's view, the leadership of thinking has taken the college to this point as they do look at things differently. They stop and listen to what the issues are in creating a truly 'blended' team with the right range of skills and expertise and are careful to balance things when required. This needs fine judgement and understanding to do this and the role of HR is crucial in influencing this process of organisational development. The use of psychometrics to see how people work together, the use of future analytics, the use of data-driven information and techniques for making decisions are put together in a way that is common in the private sector, but less used in the FE sector.

Since joining the organisation, Paul has taken steps to share the leadership of thinking that he feels has the potential to transform an organisation. The Senior Leadership Team meet twice a year to spread the learning from their strategic thinking, and knowledge gained from sources inside and outside

of the sector is shared with cross-functional teams. This has had good feedback as in Paul's view people generally want to do better, they just need the frames of reference through discussion and debate to do this.

Paul considers that the area reviews have highlighted that people in FE need to be more accepting of change and seek advice from various sources inside and outside of the organisation to help them do that – the status quo cannot remain with things changing as they are. But the issues are as much with college governing bodies as with the leadership teams. A governing body should have a wide range of people with relevant expertise so that they can hold the CEO and teams to proper critical account. Too often boards are made up with good but not necessarily expert people who cannot do this effectively. The leadership of thinking in governing bodies is crucial to the development of FE and Skills.

Chief Executive John Thornhill explains that the LTE Group has a planned leadership strategy which involves recruiting the 'best in class' in terms of experience and necessary expertise into the organisation whilst also maintaining traditional academic leadership across the executive team and other boards. This blend of leadership was crucial to the success of recruiting people for their thinking. But thinking differently has a timing issue: in times when things are on an even keel an organisation will recruit differently to when things are changing by the month. The leadership of thinking is different in each scenario. The Board appointed John as a leader who could operate effectively with government, but also cross-sectorally and commercially and paired him at the outset with a fully-fledged Principal for academic leadership. This blended approach has characterised the recruitment of leaders who are almost polarised in terms of their experience and flexibility and attracted by this vision of leadership and the journey to creating something different. The journey involving learning from each other and getting the best from each other exemplifies the leadership of thinking in John's view.

Time needs to be set aside to take this journey and requires a radical change which is structural in nature. The senior leadership team - 50 people - get together regularly to share the exploration and development of this strategy. They have been using the thinking of Steve Peters (a psychologist with the British Olympic Team) as a speaker and working through his ideas.

The 'leadership of thinking' has been equally crucial in terms of governance at TMC and John considers that they are 70% there in addition to the experience of the governing body. They have used the Manchester Chamber of Commerce to actively seek out the senior level of skills appropriate for their needs (legal, employment expertise, education, expertise for the property strategy, HE expertise). This changes the make-up and culture of a governing body and requires adequate support and recompense for such highly experienced board members.

## Induction and orientation

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**Once a new leader has been appointed there is then the question of how to create the conditions for them to succeed over and above what would normally be done for any other recruit. One area mentioned consistently by our participants was the need to have clear parameters to work within and a mutually understood set of expectations.**

In any new environment it is necessary to tune in to how things are done and to test out the boundaries, but there is an added layer of complexity when entering a new sector, especially if part of the purpose is to shake things up. Both the individual and the wider leadership team need to be clear where the boundaries of the role lie, who needs to be consulted on specific issues, how decisions will be made, and when it is necessary to escalate. The wider staffing of the organisation needs to know why an 'outsider' has been brought in and what they might be able to contribute. They also need to be aware that the individual has permission to look at things in a very different way. If all this isn't understood, unnecessary misunderstandings can arise and the job becomes a whole lot more difficult.

One of our new leaders was very explicit in telling his new colleagues that he would be asking what might appear to be 'daft questions'. This could simply be because he didn't have the same background knowledge as they did, but it might also be because he hadn't been conditioned into the same preconceptions about how things could or could not be done. Apparently

'daft' questions can be a very powerful way of getting people to think about things differently, but it helps to know that they might be coming. If not, credibility can be damaged.

Predictably, leaders recruited from outside also need the time and space to engage with, and develop their understanding of, the sector that they have joined. One interviewee talked about the need for a type of 'contract' to protect the time required. There are at least two elements to this orientation: the technical dimensions around regulation, funding, quality and so on; and the broader cultural and political elements. All this provides the broader context for their thinking and helps them to situate their own organisation within the wider picture that they develop. This orientation can be done in any number of ways from attendance at sector events or briefings to network groups or visits to other providers. The important thing is exposure to a range of different perspectives. Nor should all this be absorbed uncritically; part of the benefit of new blood is the ability to maintain some distance and to look at things from a more objective standpoint. This is an edge that shouldn't be blunted.

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## Case Study: HIT Training Ltd – creating a leadership legacy

HIT training is a leading specialist training and apprenticeship provider for the UK's hospitality and catering industry. Jill Whittaker is the Managing Director of HIT and her major concern is bringing new blood into the organisation and maintaining the legacy of the organisation that she started.

Jill is spending time now making sure that the organisation is addressing this need which was recognised by her Board in December 2015. The strategy has been to recruit a commercial director with some knowledge of the sector but with real expertise in maximising sales; to make a personnel change in an established leadership role; and to put together a 'Rising Stars' programme to show what opportunities and pathways there are for new and existing staff, and a 'Lead to Exceed' internal programme for managers.

This strategy has been supported by the Board and the key to implementation is the HR manager and team, comparatively small for the size of the organisation (500 staff) but possessing real energy for change and clear emotional intelligence in dealing with new and established personnel.

Jill thinks that what sets HIT Training apart from other ITPs is that it is sector specific (hospitality) rather than generalist and that Jill as MD knows the sector, the business and the network of related businesses inside out - to the extent that she can headhunt externally for a particular post should the organisation need it. Networking is key to this approach as in Jill's view the organisation cannot trust this to recruitment agencies and cannot always recruit internally. She has developed as MD over the past 10 years a huge network of contacts in order to identify potential new leaders and is really close to the business so leads the thinking in this way.

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## Getting the best out of new leaders

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**For most of our new leaders the first year was challenging as they gradually surfaced the peculiarities of the further education and skills system. This is to be expected, and is true to a certain extent with any change of organisation, even in the same sector.**

More important is how to ensure that we get a long term impact from people rather than simply a short term stimulus. Avoiding getting so sucked in to the 'doing' aspect of a job that the time to think, or to enable others to think, disappears is an obvious risk. That time to think that was part of the original plan can easily get eroded away; it needs continuing protection. Some organisations are starting to look at different levels and types of leadership role and allocating notional amounts of time to strategic and operational aspects; for example 60/40 for a second tier leader. Part of the purpose of this is to enable people to extend their leadership of thinking capabilities to explore future vision rather than simply addressing today's challenges. The personal review then focuses on how successfully this balance is being maintained.

There may also be some cultural issues to address. One interviewee referred to the 'luxury of time to think'. An understandable reaction to a busy world but it may also betray a lack of perceived value in taking time to reflect. Another participant expressed concerns about being thought to be 'skiving' if he took time out to think. Organisations need to be clear that they value this type of work, and see it as an entirely complementary to the more obvious 'doing' parts. Everyone needs to understand this; and to understand that thinking which challenges existing norms and orthodoxies is an important part of a healthy organisation.

Inevitably there will be frustrations. Continuing encouragement is vital, especially when the inflexibilities in the system look like insurmountable barriers. Some will need support to keep their resolve and confidence in the quest to find new ways. In other cases the freshness or novelty of a new environment will wear off over time. Our interviewees acknowledged the risk of starting to accept the status quo simply because they had got used to it.

It is also important for everyone to understand that being new has a shelf life. Our participants and their organisations found this simple fact to be very helpful at the start, but this only lasted for a limited time after which individuals need to demonstrate their credibility and prove their impact.

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## Case Study: Leicester College – freedom to experiment

Leicester College is one of the largest FE colleges in the UK with 1200 staff. Skip Evans was recruited as a new senior leader for international work in November 2014 and is now the International Manager. Before this he had worked in the civil service in Australia.

There was no deliberate strategy at Leicester College to recruit leaders from outside the sector for different or new thinking. Skip was employed for his skills and expertise to lead the expansion of the international area of business and this is having an impact more generally. Previously, the team had consisted of 2 staff doing what was essentially administrative work, such as processing applications. Skip was recruited to develop a strategy of expansion beyond recruiting international students and now other colleagues are being recruited with similar specific skill sets.

The college has become more open to doing things differently. Skip has been supported 'amazingly' as he described it by the senior leadership team and given autonomy to take risks; the college has given him space to develop new initiatives and to think about looking for more business overseas.

What is key to the leadership of thinking in Skip's view is having the freedom to change and develop a team under a new leader. Skip was conscious that some staff might not be flexible or open to new ideas and he was given very good support over 12 months to develop his team. If a good HR team understands the staffing issues and helps the new leader to manage people in and out it can help to make change a positive thing for the whole organisation. Putting trust in a new leader to try out new ideas and take risks, as Skip has experienced in his time at the college, sets an organisation apart in its leadership of thinking.

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## Organisational context

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**The extent of the contrast between the organisation that the individual previously worked in and their new employer also needs bearing in mind. For many interviewees, their move into a college or independent learning provider involved a shift into a much smaller organisation.**

Whilst you might expect this size difference to bring with it quicker decision making the reverse often seemed to be the case and some were frustrated by the layers of bureaucracy and inflexibility, especially in larger colleges. Part of this seemed to be about the rules that govern the sector, but part was also about organisational behaviours. Many new leaders felt the need for greater delegation of authority and responsibility for decision making: particularly those who had come from the private sector. In contrast, many of those who had moved from the public sector had found moving to an FE organisation provided greater freedom as a leader.

There were other contrasts too. New leaders, particularly among independent providers, often experienced a lack of commercial awareness among staff. On the other hand, they were impressed with their dedication and focus on learners. These two elements need to be kept in balance and new leaders felt that their fresh perspective could help to achieve this.

The situation that an organisation found itself in at any given time also influenced the pace at which new thinking might be developed. It was relatively more straightforward to initiate things when there was a collective understanding that a tipping point had been reached and something had to be done. It could be more difficult when an organisation appeared to be performing quite acceptably; perhaps because complacency had set in.

There was also a view that changing organisational structures might influence how the leadership of thinking works in the future. The emergence of new types of role such as the CEO alongside principals in college groups could open up space for more creative work on how the future might look. Similarly, the incorporation of academies within college groups could lead to more cross fertilisation of ideas about education across different phases.

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## Case Study: WEA – a balancing act

The Workers' Educational Association is the UK's largest voluntary sector provider of adult education. It has 400 local branches, 3,000 volunteers and 2,000 part-time tutors.

The Chief Executive is Ruth Spellman and, with her Board of Trustees, she recruited Ian Hanham as the Chief Operating Officer in March 2015. Ian brought financial expertise and experience of governance and of support functions having worked in the commercial and charity sectors.

Ian saw from the outset that the WEA clearly recognised the need for change in a rapidly moving financial climate but that it was quite risk-averse, so for him and the leadership team it was a matter of developing confidence in thinking about risk strategies as well as recruiting the right leaders to take the organisation forward.

The leadership team in place now has been a deliberate mix of appointing internal expertise (skills, knowledge and credibility) together with external applicants for objectivity and different thinking as much as particular specialist skills. This was not following a formulaic approach, rather the result of a great deal of thinking and making clear judgments about what was needed. The team realised there is no short-cut to good and appropriate recruitment, but are now happy that what they have done is working very well. They have tried to pair internal and external appointments where appropriate to provide a balanced working relationship and a balanced range of skills. The identification and recognition of the right balance and the personal dynamics that go along with this balancing act requires a great deal of time for nuanced judgement and the application of emotional intelligence to make it work. This might be a honeymoon period as Ian admits but the strategy to manage this approach has been to target and then support individuals to make this partnering approach work. This change affects workload, takes space and time, but leadership conversations above and beyond the 'day job' are beginning to bear fruit.

This approach therefore requires adequate, and at times intensive, resourcing and if things get 'tetchy' as Ian says or something/someone is tripping up, then even more resource might be needed. The organisational commitment will then be tested on what may be perceived as a 'luxury' outlay of time and money. However, for Ian and colleagues there is a real sense of the WEA on a journey and the WEA on the cusp of real change. A key moment of testing will come in the coming months with significant changes at Chair and President level, along with some other changes among Trustees. A strategic perspective on risk-taking is being established, and a great deal is happening in a short space of time. Things have moved on for the WEA both in the leadership team and the Board.

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## What is distinctive about the thinking of those from outside the sector compared to internal promotions?

**Much of this project has been about the introduction of new leaders from outside the sector. Some of the drivers that have led to this type of recruitment have been discussed elsewhere, but it may be helpful to summarise what appears to be distinctive about the thinking that they are likely to bring compared to those who are internally promoted or who come from another sector organisation.**

Of course, many of these traits might also be found among people already in the sector. The capacity for radical and original thought certainly isn't confined to newcomers. One of the key differences may be perspective; not having the same sense of the history of the sector or not having been socialised into its norms and expectations.

Some of our participants had been recruited for a specific type of professional expertise, be it finance, people development or something else. In their cases they brought the experience of having done similar things in different contexts, and a way of thinking about things rooted in a different organisational culture.

Others had been recruited specifically to add a more commercial edge to the way things were done or to develop new areas of business, for example international work. In these cases they usually brought direct experience of the area in question which may have been previously lacking in the organisation. The general theme of bringing a more commercial approach was also a by-product of the recruitment of the type of professional specialist mentioned above, particularly when they came from the private sector. This added a new dimension to the leadership team.

There were also more general traits, often simply the product of having been in different places and having different perspectives. Some felt that their previous roles had made them more aware of the end to end process implications across the organisation of doing things in a particular way, whereas their new colleagues were used to adopting a narrower focus. Others were used to deploying technology in different ways, or brought more sophistication to the targeting of employers. But perhaps most significant was the willingness to ask questions and challenge how things were done. In some cases the personal qualities that allowed them to do this were at least as important as any specific skills that they might bring.

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## Derby College: the right kind of support

Derby is a GFE Group with 1500 staff on sites located in Derby, surrounding areas and nationally. Bernadette Doyle is the HR Director at the college and offered her perspectives on how aspects of the leadership of thinking can be seen in practice.

Derby College developed a deliberate strategy to recruit key posts from outside the education and skills sector when Mandie Stravino was appointed CEO in the summer of 2012. Mandie was an internal appointment so knew the organisational culture but was keen to build a broader range of skills in the leadership team. She put in place a corporate strategy in order to improve all aspects of the business. Her first appointment was Bernadette who came in from industry. The college used a recruitment consultant so Bernadette knew before she came what exactly the college was looking for and what was expected of her. The

culture was different to what she had experienced before, but HR tends to be an overarching role seen as less dependent on an understanding of curriculum.

However, the strategy of recruiting from outside of the sector has not been successful in all cases and one senior leadership appointment did not work; this was seen as a learning point about making a possible appointee really aware of what the cross-over from industry to a curriculum leadership role would really entail. This needs extensive probing about motivation and understanding at the interview stage and is not about the quality of the applicant, purely about potential culture clash. It needs a really acute understanding of people and 'fit', requiring a great deal of emotional intelligence to read a person on the one hand and make the needs of the organisation clear to an applicant on the other.

A key aspect of support and induction for new leaders has been to ensure that a leadership appointee has a good, solid, supportive second in command. Bernadette had this herself and sees this as essential as it helps the new leader to focus on the changes to be made and things to be thought about and done differently while the second in command deals with the everyday issues. This is really about back up and moral support rather than mentoring. For Bernadette, the important aspect here is to understand those staff who do not want to step up to a strategic role and who are happy to support, and to reward them with a key role in supporting others to think differently. This again needs a crucial level of emotional intelligence to see people able to do this without any potential friction, animosity or jealousy. In her view this demonstrates the leadership of thinking and moves the transformation process forward.

The link between HR and the overall strategy of thinking differently is seen as critical in terms of change for Derby College which wants to take the organisation further into the commercial sphere.

Mandie Stravino recalls that she consciously set out to build a leadership team with a mixture of skills in order to enact the new corporate strategy and drive cultural change. She began by recruiting Bernadette and, together with her, looked at different ways of working. The second appointment was a lead in teaching and learning without direct curriculum management

responsibilities. Here the college decided to target the school and university sector in order to bring in someone with a strong academic and pedagogic research background.

The third appointment was the less successful one referred to by Bernadette earlier. A fourth appointment was also made from outside the sector. Experience has now caused Mandie to reconsider the strategy on this. Many qualified and technically able people from the private sector appear to have a rather narrow view of FE and do not understand its complexity and the drivers of the education world, its cycles, and the need to balance return on investment with the challenge and diversity of education in the widest sense.

Derby College is still well on the journey that Mandie envisioned in 2012, but she insists that there is no easy answer to getting the appropriate people in the correct roles to move the organisation forward. FE organisations are significant businesses in their own right and the sector is not doing enough to attract new talent – not just in leadership, but also in teaching (specifically English and maths). FE is not being promoted as a career pathway to those in teacher training. So, although there has been a trend towards recruitment from outside of the sector, there is no magic bullet that will help FE succeed in this respect.

## Just thinking differently or leading thinking?

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**A high proportion of our new leaders were deliberately recruited because they would bring something different to the organisation. A fresh set of eyes and a brief not to accept the status quo are certainly a good start and all of our interviewees had been able to offer ideas and new insights to their organisations.**

They haven't kept their thoughts to themselves. As one participant said, 'It's no good just thinking, you need to communicate your thoughts and be visible.' Individuals will come up with good ideas all on their own, especially once they've taken the time to understand the context that they are working in, but the involvement of others along the way is very powerful. Discussion and debate, facilitated by a new leader, and with the explicit intention of developing new approaches has taken place in the teams led by many of our interviewees.

The next stage appeared to be encouraging and enabling groups, or the organisation as a whole, to do this on its own as a natural part of the way they work. At present, there is less evidence of this happening although a number of interviewees spoke about increasing delegation and devolving decision making responsibilities. This would take time to take effect simply because the behaviours ran counter to the way the organisation had previously operated. One interviewee talked about trying to find different ways into people's psyches in order to try to get them to think differently; and reflecting when people did something unexpected to be able to figure out why the change had taken place.

With any of these approaches there is an element of risk. Not every idea is a good idea; but having new ideas to consider is far better than the alternative. Our participants acknowledged that it was important not to allow groups or individuals to become discouraged if their ideas weren't accepted. Even after a filtering process, not all the new ideas or innovations that appear feasible will work as expected. All organisations will be aware

of this. What is important is that the consequences of failure have been discussed, understood and mitigated as far as possible.

A number of our participants felt that the focus for their organisation should be on risk assessment and management, rather than risk-taking as such; the latter having negative connotations. Being challenged by the relevant governance body around risk assessment was felt to be constructive as it helped to ensure that risks are properly calculated rather than an idea being rejected outright simply because there was risk involved. Some organisations had historically been very risk adverse, but were now recognising that change is needed.

## Impact of the exchange of views between new and established leaders

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**While the focus of the project has mainly been on new leaders, we were also interested in any effect that dialogue between them and their more established colleagues through the round tables might have.**

As with many events away from the workplace the simple fact that the round tables enabled people to break out of their daily routine was a benefit in itself and, in this case, the fact that there was no explicit task or information to collect seemed to add another layer of benefit. Subsequently, participants reported some general positive effects such as a heightened awareness of the need to take time to think things through properly and an improved receptiveness to other people's ideas. They also reported some modifications in the ways that they do things, for example changing their meeting patterns with a team so that they now took place less often, but were longer and at an off- site location. Part of the reason for the change was to be able to devote more time to reflection and to introduce a more strategic dimension. More generally, participants reported that they were encouraging their managers to become more strategic.

Although one distinctive element of this work was the coming together of new leaders from outside the sector with established colleagues, there was a feeling that discussion with other leaders irrespective of tenure was a good thing in itself. Some felt that there was a need for more exchanges of this type, preferably regionally based. Of course regional college and provider networks exist already, so perhaps the distinctive features of what is being mooted here are the coming together of leaders from different provider types, and the lack of formal business that needs to be transacted. Rather the focus would be on cross cutting leadership issues and future thinking.

A similar type of interaction can also work at an individual level. For one participant there was a recognition that the best crystallisation of their own thinking came from explaining what they were considering to another leader from a different organisation. In a sense this is like a mentoring type of relationship although less formalised, without any hierarchical overtones, and possibly just by means of a series of ad hoc conversations. For another, taking part in the discussion highlighted that a more traditional type of mentoring arrangement could be of benefit.

There were also reflections, perhaps confirming pre-existing opinions, about the nature of the sector. For some, hearing about the experience of colleagues new to the sector reinforced the view that the parochial nature of FE holds it back. There seemed to be two elements to this. The first was a tendency to look inwards and not to always recognise that skills developed elsewhere might be transferable. The second was the continuation of an element of distrust in some quarters between colleges and independent providers. From one perspective this may be about the advantages of grant funding and buildings originally provided by public funding; whilst from the other there can be a discomfort about the profit motive. The point was that this can build distrust and mitigate against the development of a single sector which can promote itself successfully to government and employers.

## When things don't work out

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**No form of recruitment assures lasting success. And the impact that any individual will have will always, to some extent at least, be unpredictable.**

Elsewhere, we've outlined some of the factors that can help to ensure that there is the best possible chance of things turning out well, but this won't always be the case. By the time of the round tables in October, four of our original interview group of 21 had left the organisations that they had been recruited to, although it is worth noting that in some cases they had been in post for more than 12 months at the point of leaving. Given that these individuals might have particular insights to offer we tried to get back in contact with them, but only succeeded in one case.

The provider in question had deliberately recruited someone from industry, already known to them through partnership working, for their new thinking. The ideas that were put forward by the new recruit would have necessitated structural changes in the senior leadership team, at which point the ideas were blocked. In this case at least, managers and staff were supportive and up for change; it was the senior leaders who found this difficult. Not having anticipated this reaction from the senior leaders, the person concerned left to go back to industry. The alternative was to remain and to try to form alliances with others with a similar outlook, but the feeling was that this could have been a protracted process.

Generalising from a sample of one is fraught with danger, but this experience does seem to support the view that when you recruit from outside you need to be very clear in explaining the culture of the organisation and to understand and communicate its appetite for change. It is quite possible that the existing leadership team may believe itself to be more open to radical ideas than it really is until this is tested. Setting clear parameters for any newcomer to work within is likely to mitigate the risks of any misunderstandings.

# APPENDIX 1

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## Interview scripts and case study prompts

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### Phase 1 interview questions

1. We asked you in preparation for this interview to:
  - think about the main differences in terms of leadership responsibilities and skills between your previous role and your new role. Have you been surprised at different skills that you have been expected to learn?
  - summarise any high and low points in your leadership of thinking so far
2. Do you think that there is a distinct culture of thinking about leadership in your current organisation and if so, what does this look or feel like to you? Is this different to where you worked before, and if so, how?
3. In your estimation how long has it taken for you to transfer your leadership skills (ie motivating others, building teams and using previous knowledge) from your previous role to your current position or is this still on-going? Has the existing culture helped or hindered you in this process and how?
4. In your new role, which is most important to you: what you do, or how you think? Would your organisation agree with your assessment do you think?
5. Do you have to have permission to take risks and is risk-taking encouraged and on the discussion agenda? To whom would you go with a risk that required backing? Do you think this is more or less of a challenge than where you worked before?
6. Is there a battle you expected to have in getting a plan of yours approved and how did you deal with it? Have your efforts been successful or is it too early to say?
7. Do you feel connected with all the parts of your organisation and the wider sector in which it operates? Have you ever been put in a situation where you have been asked to act as a broker or mediator for strategic purposes because you are new?
8. What leadership training and development have you undertaken and what has been the most useful to you?

9. In your new organisation is there professional development for the leadership of thinking for you and/or for your teams and, if so, of what kind?
10. Do you think that you have had a conventional or unconventional career so far? Do you think that being seen as 'new blood' has been a help or a hindrance to building trust and your long-term aims as a leader?

## Phase 2 interview questions

1. At the conclusion of the roundtable event we invited you to reflect on what you had heard or what you had said during the discussions. What subsequent thoughts have you had 6 weeks or so later?
2. Have you changed anything in your practice or your planning as a result of your reflections and what has been the effect on yourself or others?
3. Could you describe the extent to which you anticipated and/or tackled any barriers that you have faced in your new organisation?
4. Have you spoken to anyone inside or outside of your organisation about the leadership of thinking?
5. What do you think has been achieved from your newness to the sector? What other value do you think you can add to your organisation now that you are becoming more established? For established interviewees: what do they think has been achieved by colleagues new to the organisation; what other value could they add?
6. Have you a defined career or development plan? How long do you think you will stay in your current role/organisation? For established interviewees: what do you think sets apart those organisations that deliberately decide to take their thinking off in a different direction or decide to bring someone in from another sector to lead or stimulate this process?

## Case Study prompts

1. What challenges do you face in terms of recruitment in your organisation:
  - has your organisation developed formal strategies to recruit senior leaders from outside the sector?
  - have they been successful in your opinion?
  - how many of your senior staff would fall into the category of new to the sector over the last year?
2. How would you describe your induction and support for new senior leaders:
  - have you had to adapt current support mechanisms for leaders new into the sector?
  - how have other areas of the organisation reacted to staff new to the sector?
3. Has the injection of staff new into the sector changed the way that you do things in the organisation in any way:
  - what has been the effect of any new ways of doing things?
  - can you see any changes that might occur in the future?
4. Have you disseminated the thinking and discussions arising from this project in your organisation to any extent:
  - how would you describe the leadership of thinking in your organisation?
  - is there an awareness of what it might mean for the organisation (ie creating time for thinking about this)?
5. What do you think sets apart your organisation from others if indeed it has deliberately decided to take its thinking off in a different direction?



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