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LEADERSHIP AND ETHICS IN FURTHER EDUCATION:

UNIVERSITY OF HULL

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FOREWORD

Dame Ruth Silver,

President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership

As colleagues know, FETL responds to ideas brought to it from colleagues in and around the FE and skills system and does so both to harvest the intelligence and curiosity that arises from everyday experiences of leading this fast-moving sector and to harness what is wise in order to make footprints for the future. This excellent report, the second and final of a project funded by FETL and carried out by colleagues at the University of Hull, is very much in line with these intentions: it listens carefully to the experiences of sector leaders and explores critical issues concerning ethics and leadership in a style that is both creative and collaborative. As an organisation, FETL is committed to providing space within which leaders from the further education and skills sector can come together, discuss new ideas and find new ways of conceptualising them. We seek both to provide nourishment for our best brains and to work together with them to give their own ideas shape and form. For that reason, we have been pleased to support a project which not only reflects the varied pressures and challenges to which sector leaders are exposed but also examines them through a theoretical lens, grounded in a wide-ranging review of the relevant literature.

The end result of this research is an interesting and highly creative report concerning the conceptualisation of ethics and leadership in further education and skills. Importantly, the report does not talk about ethical leadership as a fixed, immutable and uncontested concept. Instead, it recognises and explores the variety of responses taken by ethical leaders to complex, changing and non-uniform circumstances. In other words, rather than deciding at the outset what ethical leadership is and attempting to fit leader behaviour to their model, the researchers have approached the subject through the experience of leaders in the sector. This approach proves both very useful and highly rewarding. It underscores the importance of ethics in leadership as well as the challenges leaders face in behaving ethically in a challenging and unstable environment in which their decisions can often determine the future of their organisations, the lives of others and, indeed, their own professional careers.

This creates a significant tension in the work of sector leaders. As the authors argue, leaders cannot sidestep the need for ethical engagement, yet there is no template for action, no rule book, and the pressures of their professional lives often pull them in conflicting directions. It is interesting to read how leaders view these pressures, which include significant financial constraint, provider merger and the withdrawal of disability support for students, and how they respond to them. The college case studies show that it is possible to 'do the right thing' even where institutional survival is at stake. Indeed, in some cases, what is viewed as the ethical choice does not serve the interests of the institution, narrowly conceived, for example the provision of unfunded courses. Leaders describe the importance of having the 'strength to listen' and remaining accountable to staff and students. They talk about the struggle to maintain a remit for their organizations broader than the straightforward provision of skills and the need for institutions and those that lead them to take a role in civic life. The case studies show that ethical leadership can be tough but also that it is not incompatible with difficult decisions, such those concerning restructure or merger, or, indeed, with compromises necessary to ensure organisational survival.

The researchers do not attempt to evaluate the actions of the leaders who took part in the case studies, rather to offer what they describe as 'ethical insight'. They take seriously the thoughts and experiences of leaders in further education and skills, working with them face-to-face and exploring the issues they have encountered from a moral and ethical point of view. This perspective should be much more prevalent in our thinking about further education and skills leadership, as it is in the minds of many of our best leaders. Whatever else leadership is, it is an ethical concern, and it is important that this consideration is woven through our thought and actions in leading, however challenging this may appear. This report offers important insight into how leaders are doing this in the face of significant financial pressure and the day-to-day challenges of policy reform, accountability and curriculum change. It conceptualises the experience of leaders in a way which is both highly illuminating and very useful to the sector. This matters, I believe. Understanding the challenges our colleagues face, their desire to 'do the right thing', and supporting them, practically and intellectually, in bringing the ethical dimension to their leadership, can help make colleges and training providers happier, more humane and self-respecting, as well as places of goodness in which to work and learn.

INTRODUCTION

“Action without thought is empty. Thought without action is blind.”

Anonymous

This is the second and final report from a University of Hull and FETL funded research project: 'Ethics and Leadership in Further Education'. The research set out to explore approaches to leadership that embody both ethical authority and practical utility.

This report frames five leadership profile case studies out of the 10 completed for the project. Profiles one to five were self-selected in response to an email invitation sent to all FE colleges and are presented in our first report (Dennis & Walker 2016). The profiles in this report – six to 10 – were more strategic. We wanted to ensure that European and home international colleges, colleges with a high proportion of HE work and a specialist creative industries college were included in our analysis.

The report is presented to two parts.

Part one: represents an overall analysis of data generated for a series of 10 multi-method case studies. Using interviews, focus groups, an open ended questionnaire and observation, we aimed to develop a practical understanding of the behaviours and approaches adopted by ethical leaders who successfully enact their values within the FE institutions they lead.

Part two: addresses the same concern but based loosely on Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) Portraiture Methodology we present a series of 'Leadership Profiles'. These profiles suture the words spoken by research participants to construct a college leadership profile. The phrasing in this section retains the informality and at times idiosyncrasy of the language

used by participants. We have changed the grammar for presentation purposes. The intimacy of an interview or focus group spoken in the first person is re-written as a more distancing third person narrative.

We have deliberately avoided elaborating on yet another ideal type abstraction 'ethical leadership', but have thought instead about ethics and leadership. This implied not pre-defined categorical ethical judgements, but an awareness of the liquidity of the circumstances in which college leaders worked.

First of all, society is being transformed by the passage from the 'solid' to 'liquid' phase of modernity, in which all social forms melt faster than new ones can be cast. They are not given enough time to solidify, and cannot serve as the frame of reference for human actions and long-term life-strategies because their allegedly short life-expectation undermines efforts to develop a strategy that would require the consistent fulfilment of a 'life-project.'

(Bauman, 2005, p. 303)

In this situation of flux, college leaders face ongoing challenges that threatened their own professional survival as well as that of their institutions. The specific challenges are numerous but broadly fall into two categories:

- The instability of the sector that is subject to constant policy change surrounding quality, the inspection regime, accountability requirements, effective curriculum, area-based review of the number and scope of post-16 institutions, and the institutional arrangements surrounding colleges' funding
- A specific policy of austerity, leading to dramatic funding cuts that question the long term existence of state-funded post-16 education. This has dramatic repercussions for every aspect of college life from personal feelings of anxiety to provision that is so sparse its fitness for purpose has to be questioned.

The necessity for ethical engagement is inescapable. In the 1970s, Lipsky (1971) referred to Street Level Bureaucrats, – the creative work that professionals do in translating overall organisational aims and purposes into everyday organisational practice. In more contemporary literature, Dejours and Deranty (2010) talk about the space between the task and the activity. The tasks required of leaders may be clear, but between task and activity is a space filled with incidents, abnormalities and breakdowns in strategic plans. The 'real' of organisational life is found within the unanticipated, unplanned and unpredictable. 'This *irreducibly, contingent* space makes itself known to us through resistance, that is resistance to *scientific and technical control*.' (Dejours and Deranty 2010, p. 168)

It is this space that means college leadership is unavoidably ethical; it is the liquidity of modernity that means those choices cannot be scripted.

The purpose then of this second and final research report into Leadership and Ethics in FE is to provide ethical insight – rather than ethical judgement – into how the leaders profiled work within this irreducible contingency.

In presenting the final report, I want to return to FETL's overall purpose for funding.

'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 organizational performance especially in the pedagogy of vocational and technical education.'

This is distinct from the 'leadership of doing'; FETL does not fund leadership skills development or research programmes rooted in the here and now. Last year I was struck by an example from the schools sector where the

researcher talked about not focusing on curriculum leadership, but the "leadership of thinking about the curriculum as a whole" (Alexander, 2013). In other words, let's spend less time looking at curriculum leadership in isolation, and more on the leadership of thinking about doing the very best with the curriculum and its intentions in its entirety.

FETL (nd)

In response to this, we would suggest that there is little generative understanding to be gained from separating thinking and action. "Leaders do act, but only in the process of the being and becoming of thinking. Similarly, leaders think, but they think in the 'being' of a body that is acting – even if the action is sitting still. Thinking and acting together are a way of being." (Smythe and Norton, 2007 p71).

It is impossible to meaningfully separate thinking and doing. However, college leaders are very aware that college life can turn us all into what College 1N refers to as 'busy-fools'. For example, the absence of any fixed definition of 'quality' encourages us to engage in anxiety-fuelled hyperactivity. This is, we suggest, the 'banality of college life' (Dennis, 2016). A quotidian banality which keeps us so utterly grounded in action, as 'busy-fools', little time is left to ponder the significance of what we do.

The leadership of thinking allows time to think through issues that are of curiosity and interest. And here, interest means:

'... to be among and in the midst of things, or to be at the center of a thing and to stay with it'

(Heidegger, 1992, p. 371)

The leadership of thinking tropes that we have developed here pick up from where the metaphors in the last report concluded. The metaphors might well be rephrased and reframed to fit the shape these thought vignettes are taking.

They represent an interrogation of the data through Bank's (2011) four-part lens

- Character – what qualities are regarded as good and bad?
- Relationships – what responsibilities are attached to relationships?
- Conduct – what actions are regarded as right and wrong?
- The good society – in what kind of society do we want to live?

CHARACTER

The Fosbury Flop – curriculum innovation

'Thinking outside the box,' is a cliché of corporate leadership training. But this style of thinking is precisely what took Olympian Dick Fosbury over the bar and into the history books. His backward flip high jump broke all previous records and is now the standard way the sport is approached. College leader 7F refers to thinking about things differently – even if it seems uncomfortable and strange. His Heston Blumenthal school of curriculum design, (an approach to curriculum that deliberately blends subjects that at first seem nonsensical but ultimately provide unexpectedly appealing fusions) has led to brickies and sports scientists working together. Sports scientists developed warm up and stretching exercises for brickies to use to avoid back injury. The approach filtered back into the workplace, saving employers substantive amounts of money in sick pay. A similarly interdisciplinary success was made possible when make-up artists and construction students got together, using models made up to show in graphic detail what a workplace injury can look like. The gruesome image of a severed finger or cracked skull are extremely persuasive when considering whether or not to use safety equipment.

But it is not just the specific projects that are of interest here. It is the leadership of thinking and the ethical frame that precipitates it. It is the 'strength to listen' that matters. A willingness to welcome tutors' voices, to develop institutional structures that promote tutor autonomy – for example, physically relocating management to create greater space for distributed decision making and, perhaps most importantly, to 'never let a colleague fail', that is leadership that allows tutors to innovate by saying: 'the risk is ours'.

RELATIONSHIPS

Do the right thing

FE is a high-risk working environment. College leaders are accountable to employers, funders, OfSTED and governing bodies. Perhaps it is being under such constant and critical scrutiny that makes the sector overly compliant. All college leaders also feel a deeply engrained ethical accountability to students. 'Do the Right Thing' is an abiding theme and the phrase came up repeatedly. All college leaders consider themselves to be ethical. All college leaders consider ethics to be an important aspect of who they are and what they do. They spend a great deal of time considering what the ethical thing to do is and there were several examples of college leaders making ethical decisions even when these were unsustainable or undermined their institutional self-interest. Offering unfunded provision; accepting students who will have a detrimental impact on their performance data; refusing to participate in lucrative franchise arrangements or subcontracting. These practices are accepted after some deliberation as 'the right thing' to do.

But, 'do the right thing,' can equally serve as an ethical glaze. If intoned without challenge it can be brutal. One college, having made a quarter of its staff team redundant over a three-month period, concluded that it was the 'right thing' *as it allowed them to remove the fat from the organisation*. The situation was managed with care and kindness and, driven by the external situation, was an absolute necessity. However, the necessary thing is not the same as the *right* thing.

Underpinning accountability to students is an ultimate ethic that all colleges subscribe to: an ethic of survival. College leaders will do anything and everything they can to secure the continuity of the organisation – even if that means accepting unwanted, unwelcome and sometimes unnecessary change if policy foists it on them. So adept is FE at responding to the demands of its policy-driven environment, it may assume any shape and form that allows it to survive.

'Do the Right Thing' is a powerful galvanising ethical slogan but should not be taken at face value. It may be better understood as 'Do the Right Thing *in the current circumstances*' or 'Do the Right Thing *as the compromise I'm prepared to live with*'.

CONDUCT

What would Obama do?

College leaders strive to find compromises they are prepared to live with in circumstances that are too frequently beyond their control. What is of interest here is the ethical thinking that frames this approach. It is possible that there is, in 'Do The Right Thing' amidst the ethics of survival, an ethical abdication. That is, an acceptance that the sector and the communities it serves have no democratic voice. Might one advantage of fewer bigger colleges be the capacity for the sector to speak with one democratic voice. The Dutch and home international college leaders have this advantage and were able to cite moments when they had influenced policy in a direction that was more sympathetic to the sector.

There is another way of framing the ethics that underlie 'Do the Right Thing'. One college leader adopted a variation on the theme that was interrogative and gently ironic: *What would Obama do?*

It is at this point that the value of cynicism – strong cynicism (Allen, 2015) – is apparent. We asked each of the college leaders if there was anything that would make them leave the sector: was there a policy turn that they would simply refuse to comply with on ethical grounds, acknowledging that this would put their professional lives at risk.

The strong cynic (Allen, 2015) has the boldness to admit that FE is so fatally undermined that, if it is to be rescued, it needs fundamental

reconstruction. A reconstruction that implicates society and would involve at its core the reconstitution of the educator herself.

College 9P leaders have made the decision to leave FE, taking the institution with them. They have re-designated the college's status as a HEI and opened a school. This was in preference to watching a car crash for the creative industries in slow excruciating horror. It is also an example of strong cynicism: recognising that carrying on, abdicating their ethical responsibility with a smile, would not be enough.

THE GOOD SOCIETY?

What is FE for

A sense of what FE is for is the ultimate ethical guide for college leaders. And while governments insist that FE is there to provide skills and all leaders recognised this is the ultimate purpose of the sector, the enactment of that purpose was far subtler. What governments actually demand from FE is much broader than skills. If FE is about skills, then the radicalisation of young people should not be our concern, let alone responsibility. If FE is about skills, then developing close links with a community involving the mutual sharing of spaces would be an uninteresting irrelevance. If FE is about skills, then employing wellbeing officers would be an unnecessary luxury. Perceiving the college as the last stop before prison should have no place in our thinking. The notion of civic leadership would be beyond the sector's scope. Within each of the colleges it is clear that FE is about so much more than skills. Might it be that there are several interesting, legitimate, contradictory and changing answers to the question, 'What FE is for?'. And while:

The primary purpose [of FE] is to bring young people to a profession. And secondary is that we also want them to be good citizens. We want to make good people of them. People who don't only know how to do the work right, but also know how they can get a place in society. And they can develop themselves to the next level?

College 10T

this is a worthwhile view of what vocational education is for, the question defies a single definitive answer. Instead, what matters can be ethically framed as a process:

I always think if you know why, if you can answer the question why, it doesn't matter if you get lost or distracted you can always go back to base. If you can't answer the question why, then you're lost. You are lost. And so we know why. We answered that question [the question of why] and that answer determines the what and the how. So that's what I mean by direction. We have a vision, a shared vision, a commonly owned vision. It's not a label. It's something we keep developing. So there's a sort of energy and I think I would say the ability to make decisions in these leadership roles and the ability to hold a vision, regardless of the volatility around us.

College Leader 9P

The case studies below make visible the ethical dilemmas that give rise to the compromise between student-centred ideals and surviving as an organisation in 'liquid' circumstances that may help explain the presence of varying degrees of risk taking and ethical abdication in leadership thinking. As with those presented in the interim report, the extracts are taken from participants' own words with small grammatical changes or words added to signpost and link the ideas to fit this change context. As such, each forms a profile of leadership rather than of individual leaders. Each profile has been checked and approved by participants.

LEADERSHIP PROFILE: COLLEGE 6G

If you can think of a better hole, go to it

If we get the merger right it means that we continue to lead skills in the area, and we protect the curriculum, and we protect access to the curriculum to the people who live here. Yes, that's a massive leadership challenge. You can't underestimate the leadership challenge of doing a merger; but at the same time, it feels right, and it feels like it's the best way of securing a future right now. Not the only way, perhaps, but it's the best way. There's a lovely World War 1 cartoon that shows two Tommies sat in a shell-hole, and there's bombs going off all around them, and it simply says at the bottom,

"If you can think of a better hole, go to it."

College Leader 6G

The college has had a difficult time financially over the last few years. A couple of years ago it was insolvent and an inspection rated the quality as poor. But, now things are stable. A recent inspection graded them as good across the board. There's much to celebrate. When the college went through difficult times there was a hunkering down, but they're in a different situation now. They are working well with local employers and community groups and there's loads of partnership working. There are cuts, but the more cuts they make, the more partnership working the college does. Local groups and local partner arrangements help to make sure they can still get the services they need.

We are a rural college, rooted in our immediate community

We are very much of our place, and I think that sense of place is important, and probably impacts on our values and our ethics and our decision making and our leadership. It's certainly informed by sense of place. I sometimes say any family within 5 to 10 miles of here will have had a member of the family at this college at some point. So you're kind of ingrained in people's families.

College Leader 6G

College leaders are not interested in trying to do regional or even national work. Their focus is on developing an intergenerational dynamic. They refurbished part of the college estate recently and found that the builders who worked on the original project had grandchildren – currently training as apprentices – working on the current build. Local people view the college with pride. In this they feel unlike some other colleges. The local community champions them, recognising them as civic leaders. In a low-wage, low-social demographic economy, the college is a support rather than a hindrance. The Principal has developed a reputation for being something of a civic leader. The local borough council and local industry ensure he always has a seat around the table. This is not something enjoyed by all colleges. The college also receives a good press. Foundation learners do supported internships in the local hospital. The college provides community-based ESOL classes, and has provided basic skills in literacy and numeracy for parents in local schools. The Community Health team come into the college and use the specialist gym equipment. This college clearly has impact. It is responsive to local needs. This is a friendly, aspirational college. It is a beacon of hope in a community that really needs one.

Creating heroes

But things are changing. The education ecosystem is being disrupted. What they need is not more change but stability. Schools in this area are low-performing. And low achievement leads to low aspirations. Part of the college's role, their opportunity and their challenge, is to raise aspirations. The college is in a region that has the lowest HE participation rate in the country. Because of this, they put a lot of emphasis on doing more HE work. The college knows that the moment someone in the family gets a degree, achieves an advanced apprenticeship or secures a job because of an apprenticeship, they become an advocate for the college. The college is creating heroes by offering people a chance to complete a HE programme.

But they are aware of the need to be cautious: how long can colleges keep providing courses for which they get no government funding? Some of their programmes for 16 to 18 year olds are not financially viable, but they offer them anyway because for some students it's the right thing to do. A course for learners, who at 17 would otherwise be classified as Not in Employment, Education or Training, is expensive. You have to flood it with staff to make sure that they have a decent experience, and that they're looked after. The most cost-effective thing is not to do it at all. But this creates other social problems in the town. And this college plays the role of civic leader.

When you come to an area like this, you see and hear some things that [...] make you very angry. Very angry about politicians who never see it and don't know about it, or don't want to know about it. They don't see broken society, and we deal with that all of the time in FE.

College Leader 6G

More apprenticeships may be the answer for these young people. But how many employers are going to buy into that? The college feels a misfit between the stuff that comes out of government which is all highly plausible, presented as highly doable and very aspirational – and the real day-to-day stuff. The stuff governments, civil servants and politicians

don't see. The college deals with young people who are third and fourth generation unemployment. It is their job not to make excuses for them but to re-engage them. These young people are tough ... extremely tough. If you treat them right they come round. But governments don't see that. All they see is doing things the German way, and that means flagship apprenticeships. The college has to make choices. It's not all about numbers and targets. There are some employers the college will not work with because they're poor employers with a bad reputation. This is an ethical stance and the college is aware that supporting apprenticeships with some employers means supporting a low wage economy and that's not the right thing to do. International research, economic and industrial policy is fine, but you need to scratch beneath the surface and look at what's underneath.

Where are the stepping stones?

As a sector I think we'll see some colleges go insolvent. I think we'll see fewer colleges in the next five to 10 years. It'll be either assimilated through merger, or acquisition, or they will simply fall by the wayside, never to be seen again, and alternative arrangements will appear.

College Leader 6G

Funding has handcuffed college leaders. They don't want to have classes exclusively for 16-18 year olds, but funding arrangements push them that way. Nineteen year olds are on a different funding stream. Most of the courses do have three or four adults in them. This intergenerational dynamic is what the college wants. Adult learners in a vocational class enrich the dynamic. This means that to remain viable they need to have larger and larger class sizes. FE is just not valued and it seems obvious that the government is trying to manoeuvre the sector to become like the old polytechnics. But if the government were able to look behind the headlines and statistics, they'd see all the youngsters that can't get beyond Level 1 or Level 2.

The reality the college deals with is that there will always be 16 to 18 year olds and they will always need some form of education and skills training post-16. What that looks like, they're not sure. But there will always be that need and the college should be the ones who fulfil that need. That's the starting point. What it means to be a good college, able to thrive, is always changing. Twenty years ago it was about participation. Ten years ago it was about success rates. New measures are about progression and destination.

But how do we move from one measure to another and how do students struggling to move beyond level 1 get from one place to another: where are the stepping stones?

College Leader 6G

You either guide your own future, or someone guides it for you

In the whirlwind of policy change, college leaders have to decide – what do they want to protect, what are the things they most value? Is it breadth and depth of provision? How do they do that? Doing the same things that they currently do isn't an option. One outcome of being an early and active participant in the area review process is to accept the possibility of merger. If they get it right, merger simply means that they can continue to lead the skills in the area, protect the curriculum and protect access to the curriculum for the people who live here. That's a massive leadership challenge. One that it's important not to underestimate. But for this college in its current situation, it feels right: it feels like it's the best way of securing a future. Not the only way, but the best way. They have no choice but to pick a spot, put their tin hat on and do the best they can where they are.

The college has done well to keep going throughout the merger; they have not lost sight of their duty to develop wellbeing, character and resilience in students and staff. The things they do well must continue not for the next month, but for six, 12, and 24 months. For college leaders this means putting aside their personal vulnerability for the stewardship of the institution. The situation creates organisational tensions.

The short-term decision about *How do we do best we can for the people who are here right now?* versus the long term stewardship, *How do we set ourselves up, so that this institution will thrive?* for the next 20 years or 50 (if you're putting buildings up). What matters is long term survival, even if what survives has a different name, and a different set of people leading it? In other words, long term survival might undermine the short term survival needs to current college leaders. As well as the short-term versus the long-term view, there's also the business view versus the teachers' view. They pull in different directions. It's like driving an oil tanker. You can weather the storm that's here now and bounce around on the waves, but actually, some of that's a bit set for you. They know that it's going to be stormy, so it's how you navigate. But what direction do you point the oil tanker in? What's on the horizon?

It's not about being big; it's about being adaptable

The college is confident about the future of the institution and the sector. The college will continue: the sector is resilient, it changes and it works its way through. The merger suggests an even greater future if it all goes ahead properly, but this doesn't mean bigger is always better. This is a competitive environment and other colleges are looking at returning to the area by building a £50-million college. The whole situation is Darwinian: the colleges who are most able to adapt are the ones that will survive. Government want to create big institutions, but there's nothing in Darwin's work that says 'big survives' – if there was, there would be dinosaurs everywhere. It's not about being big; it's about being adaptable. The reality is simple: if the college does not adapt, it will not survive. This way of thinking may sharpen how everything else is viewed.

The Area Review – with its emphasis on big rather than adaptable – points towards a college leader as Chief Executive Officer rather than Principal. Once colleges start talking about CEOs they lose touch. Principals understand education; they understand what's going on socially. Parachuting people in and out to do CEO jobs is absurd. The college leader needs to be part of the community; they have to understand young people.

It's great to have a CEO as a business manager as well: colleges are, after all, independent organisations and it's useful having someone take care of finance and resources. The Principal is then free to deal with teaching young people. But the college has to be driven by curriculum. Colleges shouldn't apologise for being about education. They're not business islands. Education is about changing people's lives.

College leaders feel the current government's thinking is that FE colleges exist to provide industry with skills, to close the productivity gap and contribute towards economic development. If that – and only that – is what FE is for, then that – and only that – is what FE will be funded for. The concept of learning for learning's sake is lost in this equation: learning because it's rewarding and changes your life disappears. Learning because it fosters character development or resilience, allowing you to be successful in all aspects of your life – as a parent, or a neighbour, or a friend – all of this gets trimmed and lost. These benefits are not developed further if FE is just skills-focused.

LEADERSHIP PROFILE: COLLEGE 7F

Making Learning Work

The area review gives colleges an opportunity to reposition themselves in the economic scheme of things with schools, with government and with others. That's what our regionalisation did. It's taken us ten years. It's not quick, but the issue you have to nail very quickly is the culture – we are College 7F and we are making learning work, making learning work, making learning work.

College Leader 7F

In 1993 there were 43 colleges in this area. By 2011 this was reduced to 32. By 2015 there were further reductions to 20 colleges across 13 areas. It has been chaos. According to the Audit Office, some college Principals walked away with lucrative pay-offs in excess of £200,000. It doesn't happen now – after the fact it's been viewed as unfair – but if your contract allows for twice your annual salary to go, that's what you get paid.

The difference in pay across the sector is quite remarkable – lecturers are paid up to £40K in some colleges but capped at £28K in others. That's why national bargaining came in. Leaders in this college believe that national bargaining has been used by the Scottish government as a smoke screen to

take the Unions' eyes off college mergers. As a diversion tactic, it's worked. The government has been able to sharply reduce the number of colleges with little Union opposition. The mergers have been complex and key issues are still being resolved. More than a third of all colleges have been merged or closed down. But the Trades Union has not been paying attention. After a year of national bargaining an agreed pay scale is still not in place. But college leaders have been shut out of pay bargaining. Responsibility lies elsewhere. And, it's no longer the colleges' problem. It will become this college's problem when it affects their staff. It is frustrating for college leaders that this is not recognised.

Before merger, College 7F was big and successful. After the merger they were even bigger and able to offer provision in an area that had nothing. But it is not size that matters: the college takes progression seriously, whether university, further or higher education or employment and the college enjoys a 94% positive destination rate.

To enhance their profile College 7F wanted to do so much more with local schools and communities. They organised a show and tell. The educational guidance staff from local schools are invited in and shown around. They'd already been a few times but that involved sitting in what was then the college boardroom being trained. To revitalise the event, heads of department joined in and took the guidance staff out, showing them around the college estate. They'd never had that. That's not all they do. They invite the local authority to hold executive team meetings in the college and the college has held their senior team meeting in the local University campus or Council premises. College leaders are intent on showing who they are and being transparent.

The college wants the local community to use the buildings as if they belonged to them. College leaders use their space for outreach – giving community groups rooms free (day or evening), with the idea that once they have been onto campus they will want to access classes. This has worked well with some groups: a drug or alcohol recovery support group came onto campus for a day, getting Indian head massages, pedicures, getting their nails done. Despite the bravado and banter – it broke the ice. Some of them are now at college. It's a slow process.

The college is currently building on campus a 500-seat theatre for the community, funded by the Council. It's proving to be highly complex and there are a number of issues to resolve before a final Council decision is made. The project has led to a few misplaced priorities. Everything seems to rest on the theatre which costs £8 million, while the new college – which seems to be taking a secondary position – costs £73 million. But it's an important part of their strategic link to the community and college leaders want the theatre as part of their college campus.

Curriculum innovation as the Fosbury Flop

We've gone like a very steady climb because you've been doing your scissor kick. How do you take yourself higher than that bar? Will you have to start doing things differently? Run at it backwards, and make the world record ten inches higher just by doing things differently.

College Leader 7F

The college has introduced empowering new opportunities for teaching staff and new interdisciplinary learning across sectors. For years, construction students had to produce a PowerPoint presentation showing the need to be aware of health and safety. A conversation between a lecturer in construction and a lecturer in make-up artistry brought two groups of students together. The make-up artists provided pictures of what it's like if you don't wear the right safety equipment – severed fingers, metal saws in heads. They contain really quite graphic pictures, but goodness me, students remember: if I'm not wearing these particular gloves I can lose a finger and there's a picture of someone who's lost a finger.

Another great example was sports students and brickies working together. The sports guys would say why is it whenever we do anything we would warm up for ten minutes beforehand in a particular way? Brickies just go out and you put bricks in therefore they get bad backs. Sports coach students designed a warm up exercise for brickwork people and the apprentices then took it back to their companies. Their companies come back and say that's good, I'm not losing ten grand a year on sick pay because my guys have all warmed up.

In 2015 the college won a UK award for innovation. When they went down to England to collect it, they realised they were miles ahead of the competition and they wondered why other regional colleges weren't flying the flag. It's great for the area when you've got an award for your college. It's about gaining a high profile so they can say: remember us. Remember also what we can do for the economy.

Their regional government minister thinks they should have skills academies. So the college leader contacted her and said, why are you talking about new skills academies: they're your colleges. Don't muddy the water. There are colleges and universities and good working relationships between colleges and universities, and then apprenticeship schemes. That's it. When you say we need a skills academy, is that because the colleges are rubbish? No, it's because it's a 'buzz' word. It's just confusing from an employer's perspective; they just want someone with a qualification.

College as an ecosystem

How do you make a really good college into one that's even better? Good to great and even better? It's the ripple effect. It's about interdependencies. I'm looking at this as an ecosystem and nobody works in silos, they all work together as a community within a habitat and that habitat is the college. And when a community works really well it's because everybody understands their place and fits in. You don't have silos and it's hard. But when you break that down, boy does it make a difference about taking a college to the next level.

College Leader 7F

In some meetings, college leaders say they can almost touch the energy, and see how people work across areas from student finance to the support areas, to marketing; it's an absolute joy.

The college's strategic plan is delivered by six people who are real experts in their field [for example, finance and estates management] but they are also 'people' people who understand what it's like to be involved in a college. Each of them have line management responsibility for the head of

one or more teaching departments. This means they understand what the issues are within a teaching environment. What a difference it makes to the senior management team when they all 'get it'. Teaching and learning are the college's core activities, not balancing the books, not making money. It is about that but it's also about the core activity.

The college used to have ten values statements but they were not very memorable. So college leaders did away with big statements of values which look good on a front page of a strategic plan but didn't mean anything. Instead, they just put words that were important to them and left it up to staff how they interpreted those. Micromanagement is not the college's style. Managers know they can make decisions, so they go ahead and do that. If there's a big issue they need to come down and discuss it. The college gets more out of people by doing that.

Staff autonomy

You'll wonder where I'm going with this. Britain's Got Talent is my favourite programme of all time. It's the only time I will ever shed a tear when watching something. And that's seeing people get a second chance or come to the fore with something that was never thought about.

College Leader 7F

This is how leaders see the college, but it does not just apply to students, it's also about the college's 650 staff. How can they make a difference to staff as well as students? It's about giving them freedom and scope and space to do things; having fun with what they are doing but giving people the best opportunity to achieve their best potential.

Autonomy is crucial. This is it. There's no rehearsal. Leaders want to make as much of a difference as they possibly can. College leaders feel that they can say this is what's needed in this area, for the benefit of the area, for the benefit of the students. Lecturers have used autonomy to improve the college. When one of the college's senior leaders first joined the college as

a lecturer many years ago, it seemed from the outside like a vibrant place to work with loads of good stuff happening. But it turned out to be the worst place she had ever worked. At that time, the attitude of the staff was diabolical and the classrooms still had chalkboards. She had some responsibility and took the chalkboards out immediately because the college is not a school, it's a college. It's a different atmosphere.

And at that time supported learning was like the ghetto of the college. Her aim was to break that stigmatisation, and she did. It wasn't easy. There was a lot of resistance from staff.

And the staff were in uproar, but I pushed it and we did it and they went through and did their qualifications. And the difference and the confidence of the young people and the adults who were deemed to have this disability that couldn't – that wouldn't allow them to develop is amazing! Absolutely amazing. So, I just kept going from there and never stopped. And then I was a senior lecturer for about just under two years and then head of department left. And I thought [under her breath] 'I could do that job'. Because it looked easy. So I applied and I got it.

College Leader 7F

It has sometimes been difficult for teaching staff to adapt to autonomy. Managers and staff needed to take more responsibility for managing their teams, for making decisions, for disciplinary procedures, for offering praise – but all they did was go to a Human Resources (HR) advisor. Line managers have to challenge behaviour. They have to fight what's happening. They have to put a performance plan in place. Taking away direct access to HR has put more emphasis on the manager actually managing. One of the biggest changes is that managers, including heads of teaching, are now taking responsibility for the HR issues in their department – which they should have been doing from the start. That's their role.

FE sector – it's like herding compliant cats

In 2010, colleges were told there was going to be a 15 percent cut to the colleges. The Government went to Universities and said 'We're going to have to make some cuts', and the universities with one voice said 'No, you can't'. So the universities – who spoke collectively – had no cut. Then they went to the 43 colleges and said 'What are you going to do about this?' The colleges met to agree a response, but in some of those meetings it was like headless chickens, herding cats. People would make a decision and then someone over there would throw something in about car parking and the meeting would completely lose direction.

We used to do international work. Before the regionalisation and before we had the economic cut we used to have quite a bit extensive international portfolio in engineering and key industries. We were also involved in South Africa, in India, in China. We then stopped all international and started looking into ourselves and making the cut. I mean when we're talking about cuts I was the deputy that lost 120 staff. We closed our motor vehicle, horticulture, community outreach, languages, half our hairdressing and an element of our construction.

College Leader 7F

Now it's much more professional and better organised under the auspices of a common organisation called Colleges United. Now FE as a collective, regional organisation has been able to develop a stronger voice on a par with universities. The sector can be heard a little bit more – they are fewer institutions but more coherent than before.

The fat curriculum

The college had to reduce its staffing by a fifth. They have achieved this through honesty, trust and being open. College leaders had groups of staff in from each department with new structures, telling them exactly what was happening, how it was happening and why it was happening.: this is

where the college is now, this is where we are going. They could see quite clearly: my job's not there. They let people take that in, ask the questions they needed to ask, feel hurt, be upset – and gave them time to come back. People could be unintentionally aggressive in their questioning, particularly if their job was at risk. But managers understood they needed not to react because people needed to vent. They consulted all the way through, making sure people knew this was not personal. And then they made – or tried to make – the process as painless as possible, by putting in redeployment opportunities or a voluntary severance package or whatever else people needed to actually manage it. Some chose redundancy over voluntary severance, even though that paid less, because they had insurance through their mortgage for redundancy – so it was helping people.

The college is working on a zero based budget, so at the end of the year and at the beginning of the new year every department has got nothing. In the past, people used to say 'We've £10,000 left in the budget, let's get some new computers': that's all gone. Some people find it hard to make savings because they think, 'You're attacking my budget', but it's the college's budget, not theirs or anybody else's. The commercial areas get money in through commercial activity and they might think 'I've got the money in so I can spend it' – but the money is there for delivery and for development of materials. They should be looking at how they can work out what staff they've got to make a more efficient contribution to the college. But not everybody gets it and it can be a battle.

People need to get into the mind-set where when someone leaves they shouldn't automatically think 'I'm going to replace that post', they should look at the area and think 'How could I do that differently? Do I need that post in there? Is that the right post? Should it be a different post? Do we need still to be doing that?' Then they're making natural savings with a huge impact on people.

There's still some squeezing to be done as far as fat and making sure the curriculum is right, so ten years from now we'll see a very vibrant sector. Meantime we plough our own path.

College Leader 7F

LEADERSHIP PROFILE: COLLEGE 8B

But for austerity, we might never have made these changes

The leadership style is that we can challenge and debate but we do it with integrity and we may have a difference of opinion but we will have consensus about the way to move forward. You've got to be able to look yourself in the eye and make sure that you've made the right decision. As long as you can do that I think that's the most important thing.

College Leader 8B

The college is in a deprived, monocultural, rural area, with cities nearby. Along with levels of literacy that fall below national averages, there are high levels of unemployment and the threat of far right extremism. The region has been linked to some high profile UK terrorist plots and is a recruitment area for fighting in Syria. It hasn't affected their learners and community yet, but this may change.

Before austerity the college hadn't changed for years. It was in a bubble, unaffected by other transformations. There had never been any major cuts, never been any major redundancies. Their long-serving staff were resistant to change. But a few years ago, the college had to do something about its finances. They were in a desperate situation. There was fat in the system and college leaders were ready for change.

In June 2014 the college reduced its budget by at least £2 million by the new academic year. This was a massive challenge. One of the hardest things college leaders have ever had to do. Staff were thinking everything was alright. The level of change was tough. But, looking back on it, leaders feel they are now a better college. But for austerity, they might never have made these changes. They have accepted ministerial advice to never waste a crisis. Use it to achieve what you want to achieve. Results are better. Students are happier. Staff are happier and they have made a lot of changes. Some changes that they would have made anyway, but austerity has enabled them to change faster. Overall, the changes have had a positive impact.

Doing the right thing ... for the college

Lots of tiny little things create the whole of culture. What is leadership, what is strong leadership? There is sometimes a perception it's about the machismo [sic], puffed-up chest, the big 'I am'. We operate a bit differently here. It's ... strong leadership is being prepared to listen to staff, being prepared to be challenged by staff.

College Leader 8B

Between June and September, the college cut 170 of its 800 staff: almost a quarter. For college leaders, the key to doing this successfully was managing employee relations and keeping an open dialogue with unions. Everything was scripted, because it was really important that everybody was getting the same message about what they were doing and why. Everything was very clear and the process was handled professionally and sensitively. It was also important that people believed that they were doing the right thing for the college. That's what they try and do. And the right thing for the organisation, unfortunately, was to cut jobs. College leaders met with the Unions twice weekly, which was unusual for the sector. They managed the process without any compulsory redundancies or industrial action.

For the 170 who left, severance packages were generous. And in any case contractual changes coming to the sector were making the job less desirable. For most of them, nearing retirement, it was their time to go. They had served the sector and the organisation and it was time. For younger members it gave them the chance to try something different. If they are wise they will use the opportunity to choose a job they love and never work a day in their life.

The consequence [of the change for the college] is that the people we've got left want to be here. They weren't the people saying, "I want to leave." They wanted to stay. Restructuring creates opportunities for people, for the stars in the organisation. This place will fly if we retain the best people.

College Leader 8B

Many managers are doing jobs that were previously done by three people

'Tackling poverty' is the first FE priority set by the devolved government. To address this, college leaders pay close attention to students' emotional well-being. This was noted as best practice at their most recent inspection. Many learners come from disadvantaged backgrounds and need a huge amount of social and pastoral care, often linked with special needs. The college has invested in three wellbeing officers, who look behind problems to find the issues. If there is a concern in class in terms of behaviour, suicidal thoughts, self-harm or pregnancy, there is always somebody students can go to straight away. The college would like to double and triple the resource and give learners even more in terms of wellbeing officers, remedial literacy and numeracy support and breakfast clubs to tackle social deprivation. Austerity has had an impact not just on luxuries but on actions which have an impact on learners.

This college has chosen to cut management more heavily than other colleges because they wanted to increase resources in areas that have a direct impact on learners. And that's been quite hard for managers because many are now doing jobs that were previously done by three people.

It is difficult, the amount of change in the curriculum, the change to the funding, in all the other agendas that we're asked to comply with. We have to have 'X' amount of essential skills in the curriculum. We have to have 'X' amount of language in the curriculum, both the language and the culture. So there are so many demands on us, we're constantly juggling Constantly.

College Leader 8B

The college is a speedboat, oil tanker or cruise ship

Many parents are waking up to the fact that A-Levels and university aren't necessary the ticket to gainful employment and a good wage. If students go through an apprenticeship route they are actually able to earn more now than many graduates and graduate unemployment is fairly high in this region. So why would they want to pay the fees and the cost of living and then come out with something where they're going to find it difficult to get a job? Among stakeholders and decision-makers, the college is seen as a problem solver, coming to the table looking for solutions. When public sector organisations are facing austerity there's a tendency to batten down the hatches and weather the storm. This college's approach has been to open up.

By working with schools the college has increased contact time for learners from eight to nine hours a fortnight. College leaders try to make the changes in the post-16 landscape benefit learners and they develop partnerships with schools that think like them. That's gold dust. They plough on and wait. If other schools want to come on board then they're more than welcome.

Planned mergers have been the right route for some organisations. At this college, there's a more interesting debate around the issues. Does the college want to be an agile speedboat that can nip around, or do they want to be a big oil tanker that might be a bit cumbersome? Some bigger colleges would argue that they're a beautiful cruise ship: you still get a really nice experience in the cabins. But these decisions are about what kind of organisation the college wants to be and what impact they want to have in the future.

The leadership challenge: juggling excellence, efficiency and engagement

The college has three strategic objectives – to be excellent, to be efficient and to be engaging. These filter down to objectives given to individuals, because college leaders want everybody in the organisation to know how they fit. So if you work in the refectory you may not necessarily be directly influencing standards in classrooms, but actually students being happy, having a good break and a good nutritious meal affects their learning. It's a holistic view of wellbeing, not just what students do in the classrooms, but their general health and wellbeing is important as well.

One of the college leaders has three juggling balls symbolising the 'three Es' of excellency, efficiency and engagement permanently on her desk.

To throw one ball in the air – excellence – and catch it is straight forward. To throw and catch the excellence ball while also throwing and catching another ball – efficiency – is a bit harder. You've got to concentrate that little bit more. But the leadership challenge is to juggle excellency and efficiency while keeping that third ball in the air as well – engagement. The college has managed to do that. They have improved efficiency through staff redundancy, improved the quality of provision and are now the best general FE college in the region in terms of results. They have kept staff and students engaged throughout the process, avoiding any industrial action.

A well-oiled machine

The college is changing and the senior management team have had to change as well. The team have been exceptional at crisis management, but are now adjusting to running the college day to day, managing external relationships and moving the college to the next level. It's more hands-to-the-pump, continuing to be hard work but in a more focused way.

If you've got the right people with the right values and behaviours line managing staff, it just all becomes a little bit more effortless. It's not quite as effortless as I would like, and that's the hope, that if I can reintroduce

more resources at key pressure points, that actually I can make it a bit more effortless for staff at all levels, that's where I want to be... we're being too reactive and chasing things too much as opposed to it being more effortless work, and that's where I want to get to.

College Leader 8B

LEADERSHIP PROFILE: COLLEGE 9P

Starting a conversation

Well, in some ways what we are managing is a slow motion disaster ... if you look at the history of creative arts education over the last 100 to 150 years. We are having to manage a deeply divisive policy climate, we are having to manage the consequence of a completely ... un-joined up ... learning continuum – primary, secondary, FE, HE policy; none of it connects.

College Leader 9P

College leaders found the marginalisation of their subject in schools disturbing – the whole culture of teaching to the test meant that creativity was squashed out of learning. They felt it was important to students, regardless of what they went on to study, that they were able to be creative, to critique and to see things from different angles. The loss of creativity in the large sense, not just the subject specific sense, in secondary education, was harrowing. Increasingly, the college was getting 16 year olds who understood how to chase grades; but even though they'd done creative subjects, they didn't understand creativity.

They would say, 'At school they just teach us how to pass exams. Here we have to think for ourselves.' And that's the start of a conversation.

College Leader 9P

College leaders found the separation of FE from HE and both sectors from schools deeply problematic. They reconceptualised the college as part of a learning continuum that cuts across the spectrum of learning sectors; a dynamic rather than static model in terms of sector.

They view the college's link with a local school as more than one but less than two: a project, creating a continuum of learning from age three through to employment. The fact that the college does FE and HE but also has a Saturday arts club (the youngest artists they work with are four years old), graduate business incubation and a school means that there's a dynamism and everybody feels it. The stronger their higher education, the more aspirational their further education becomes. The stronger their FE work, the more aspirational their school-based work. In a recent project, a group of 16-year-old filmmakers at the college made films directed by 9-year-old, Year 4 pupils, from the school. The 9-year olds were completely wired by that experience but so were the 16-year olds. They bring artists and creative businesses in and that makes their provision more aspirational because students can always see the next step.

The college works like a very complex, diverse factory. They have invested in specialist workshops and studios; making the college close to a professional working environment. Parts of the college are open to the community, and are a great interface with the real world. Businesses come through to prototype work, students are involved in helping them to work out glitches or mentoring people through the process.

A layered cake of relationships

Interviewer: Who do you see as your community? Most FE colleges tend to be linked with their immediately local community. But, as an arts college, you have a national profile and international people on your management.

College: Our community is local, regional, national and international. Intergalactic, I would say. It is on different levels, isn't it? It's a layered cake of different sorts of relationships.

College Leader 9P

Every two years the college convenes a community of practice. About 160 delegates from up to 30 different countries, not just artists and designers, but economists, business people, ethnographers and anthropologists as well as makers and academics come to the college. They work with a lot of different communities, some of them international. They have, for example, just signed a memorandum of agreement with a college in India where they will come to England and staff and students will go there as well. They are guided by an ethos of making, of broadening the horizons for both students and staff. But they also value their grass roots and tap root community work. For example, they work in local schools, where it gets down to the level of families for whom the school is a life changing engagement.

What would Obama do?

The college has created within roles space for autonomy, ownership, accountability and decision making. This is so much better than locking people into formality and procedure. Meetings may generate piles of minutes but do not actually mean anything gets done.

College leaders model the behaviour they expect from their graduates. After all, they can't ask students to 'take informed risks,' or, 'be entrepreneurial,' if students can turn around and say, 'Well, you don't do that, why should we believe you?' This is why the college looks more like a private sector business than a public sector organisation. In stripping out what was unsustainable they found layers of proceduralism, a plethora of policies, and a culture in which committees were a proxy for line management. A small institution can't afford to have 166 policies or to convene a committee for every decision. It wasn't sustainable. They burnt the policies: they still have a few headline regulations, but the rest of the time they have practices for people who need guidance.

They also have a strategic plan that they've all signed up to. Most decisions can be balanced against strategic objectives. College leaders have a clear statement of their vision, ethos, purpose and values; a clear understanding of their development horizons. They've embedded risk management – avoiding the need for a risk management committee – and their points

of reference are largely external, not internal. So it's not 'is this right' in relation to a procedure, it's 'is this right' in relation to the impact it will have. The same way that Barack Obama would! Whatever the decision is, their guiding question is 'is this right' in terms of the learning experience, in terms of the city, in terms of the government's employability agenda or their own international work.

It's a car crash

College leaders are deeply disturbed by the blanket approach to the qualifications framework and the lack of comprehension of the difference between creative arts and vocational subjects in different sectors. They deal with austerity in the context of high-cost subjects; something which is never acknowledged in the way that it is in relation to STEM subjects. The intrusive ideological intervention in the qualifications framework completely fails to understand the workings of the educational engine, the academic engine that underpins the creative industries.

The college is deeply unhappy about the financial impact of austerity and curriculum reform on arts programmes, foundation degrees and diplomas. If the government were to stuff the nugatory budget available for FE into an apprenticeship framework that takes no account of the creative industries, it would destroy 16-18 art and design education. College leaders betray no trace of rhetoric or melodrama when they describe the situation as a car crash, a disaster evolving in slow motion. It is that serious. The external climate of uncertainty heaps pressure on college and staff. Their choices are to cave in or find ways of building resilience. They may be compelled to restructure. But they frequently ask themselves how much of the energy that goes into managing the consequences of austerity could be better spent developing more purposefully learning opportunities. Within the institution, morale is resilient. Everybody knows what austerity is doing. People have got friends who work in other places. College leaders feel it would be better if more of their staff got out more. They would see what other institutions have to deal with that this college doesn't have to deal with because of the way it is managed. It's notable that this college, unlike some of their contemporaries, don't have problems with industrial

relations. College leaders are open and transparent, standing up on a regular basis and telling staff what's happening. They have briefing meetings and staff know that they can ask any question they want – any question – and they do. Staff and students come to see the leadership much more than they would in a large FE College. They'll just come along and ask if they can pop in for a chat about something or catch college management out in the corridors which they certainly wouldn't do in a large college – in a large college they wouldn't even know who they were!

The impact of austerity on students

We have constant tension between widening participation ... the core beliefs and values of the institution, what is fundable and what is deliverable.

College Leader 9P

College leaders deplore the withdrawal of disability support for students. A high proportion of their young people come from poor backgrounds, a lot of them with specific learning difficulties. They welcome that and aim to support them. Art and design typically attracts a higher than average proportion of students with dyslexia. But, layer upon layer of support has been cut back. So the students get little additional support. Which means the college has to deliver in a different way. The English and maths agenda is difficult in art and design. A lot of their students have not been successful in English and maths, and they are under pressure to deliver in one year what schools have not been able to do in ten years. It would be so much easier to only take students if they've got good passes in GCSE English and Maths. It would immediately make their conversations with OfSTED more straightforward and it would save them money. But it would also undermine the potential for some students to gain entry to the college and progress. And so, college leaders remain with the tension this creates.

Given austerity, they are lucky that their foundation-degree provision is categorised as HE. They benefit from better equipment, a better library: things that they wouldn't get if it was funded as FE provision. They've juggled to get maximum benefit for students and staff. HE provision has

grown by 90% over the last six years and leaders project much further growth. They want to expand the college site, to incorporate somewhere that allows for good safeguarding to accommodate the mix of age groups. College leaders wanted their foundation-degree centre to have its own identity – to walk its own walk. Having created their own school, they now have three sites, all of which have a distinctive identity. College leaders are proud of their new building. It's lovely. Based around a historic Castle courtyard, it's a beautiful building, with a proper studio. It's lovely. Their intention is to grow their school, college and HEI communities but with a sense of progression. As the FE site becomes HE, it will have HE's energy.

It is the growth in HE that has made their FE provision sustainable. Their FE provision would be considerably larger if it wasn't so difficult, complex and would actually not break even for them.

Holding a vision while moving ship midstream

At any given time, colleges are managing huge uncertainty. In a dynamic and rapidly changing organisation, college leaders are not just holding the tiller on steady progress. Every year the college has changed because every year there's something new. This is an unreasonable working context. Ten years ago they had a strategic plan, agreed with their funding body. That plan would more or less stay in place from beginning to end, when they'd have a new one and off they would go again. They would do what they did last year, but better.

Now, things come along – a change of government, a change of policy – and they have to move ship midstream. They have to have intense conversations around decisions, priorities, probabilities, likelihoods, contingencies and what if ... College leaders have never worked in such a complex context before.

Amid this complexity, college leaders have a distinct sense of what's important: the vision or ethos that drives their core business is their sense of purpose.

I always think if you know why, if you can answer the question why, it doesn't matter if you get lost or distracted you can always go back to base. If you can't answer the question why, when you're lost. You are lost. And so we know why. We answered that question [the question of why] and that answer determines the what and the how. So that's what I mean by direction. We have a vision, a shared vision, a commonly owned vision. It's not a label. It's something we keep developing. So there's a sort of energy and I think I would say the ability to make decisions in these leadership roles and the ability to hold a vision, regardless of the volatility around us.

College Leader 9P

LEADERSHIP PROFILE: COLLEGE 10T

The good college creates good human beings, good craftspeople and good citizens

We always say we have three goals for our students, a good human being, a good craftsman [sic], and a good citizen. So there's not only making them ready for the labour market, but also trying to achieve goals like a good human being, and good citizenship. That's also important.

College Leader 10T

College 10T is huge. It has 16 different sites dispersed over an enormous geographical area, all part of the same college institution. They cater for 12,000 students and manage a budget of €100 million. It is possible for a student to start their educational career within the institutions associated with the college and complete it some years later as an adult. College leaders believe their role is to help young people to find their place in the labour market, but not only that. The job is to help young people find their way socially. This is also important. The college is part of a national project which aims to increase the number of students who complete their vocational education ready to enter the workforce as citizens.

Each school is for one 'branch' – one trade or skill, such as the School of Metalworking – leading to jobs in the local community, and each is independently managed. The disadvantage of the Principal of each school being responsible for his own school is that there is no umbrella administration. There is a great loss of energy, time and money as the

college is doing things five (or sixteen) times. Another problem is that it is not possible for students to change from one programme to another programme. They come to school when they are 16 and might think they want to be an engineer, but why? It should be possible for a student to change programme in the first year, and the college is working towards this. College leaders see that the labour market is changing very rapidly. So it is very important that students have a broad, basic programme with trade-specific training as a smaller part, so it is possible to make career changes. An important value within college programmes is that they don't teach a job, they teach students to give form to their own career.

The college's funding is dependent upon maintaining high pass rates. So far, college leaders have been able to maintain a stable budget without the upheaval or struggle for survival that follows austerity. Its results are good. But college leaders are aware that 'socially stronger' students (from more privileged backgrounds) find it much easier to gain qualifications. If they work with less confident students this creates a problem for their pass rates and their budget. If the college's pass rates reduce, they get financially penalised by the government. But the college's mission is to educate local students and so they have stuck to their goals and taken those students whom they know need vocational education even if they are not socially strong, knowing that this means they might be financially punished for their good intentions. They have been successful in lobbying government, but it's a game they have to play and it all depends on who is in power. It fluctuates. Overall, college leaders feel that education is quite well financed.

The Flat Executive

The college has a flat organisational structure. There is an Executive Board with three members who manage 16 principals, and then there are teachers. This flat structure is a choice the college has made – to do away with an extended line management hierarchy. For college leaders this means that all strategic questions are linked directly to people who work with students. Other colleges have much more layering. College 10T is quite distinct in making this choice. It is one of only a few colleges with such a flat structure.

When the executive meets with their 16 principals, their business is conducted around a huge table. That's the price you pay for a flat organisation. Communication is sometimes a little bit harder than it would be with only one or two principals. But when they do meet, they are able to explore in detail tensions between what policy says should be happening in colleges and what is actually happening. The process provides the executive with a great deal of insight. It helps them to see and understand the real problems people are dealing with every day.

I think we've got a lot of diversity of schools in our organisation. So we have a broad educational training system with a lot of professions. We like to train our students to become a craftsman [sic]. We also feel big responsibility for the social needs of the local community.

College Leader, 10T

The differences between government policy and college practice are sometimes created by what employers want. The purpose of the college is to educate young people for the labour market and citizenship. This is what government finances them to do. But employers don't value citizenship as much as the college. This creates tension. For example, technology students don't just train to do their job in their own working space. They have to be able to work with people. They need to be able to listen to the person they're working for and maximise what they do to meet what the client wants. At school, they train them to do that by working on projects in teams so that they have to learn to communicate and work together. They learn how to give feedback to each other, which is very important to help them develop as a person.

Not all apprenticeship programmes take place exclusively or mainly in the workplace. Some take place mainly in the college premises. But this is not good for all young people, some of whom find it hard to be in college for four days a week. The trouble is that college is not the place where young people will eventually do the job. Only when young people have knowledge, skills and behaviour – those three combined – can they say they know what it means to practise a job. But this workplace provision is under threat.

Government vs teachers

Most students come to school five days a week and have short periods of workplace training. For other vocational learners, it makes more sense for them to spend most of their time in the workplace because spending four days a week in a classroom is not for them. Making good programmes for part-time students based in the workplace is getting more and more difficult, because of all kinds of requirements from the government. College leaders prefer to offer vocational training in the workplace but government regulation is so strict that it is all but impossible. Offering college-based vocational training is so much less bureaucratic: it is an environment the college can control. It is not the best vocational training but it is more manageable.

So the Government wants to steer our output, and they do it with regulation? And if you don't fit within that regulation, you don't get any money, so that's the way they are steering the output of our – of our institution. [There are different ways of completing a course in vocational education. You may study for] four days at college, one working, or four days working, one day at college? That – that second way of learning – four days working, one day at school – is collapsing ... under the regulation – regulations.

College Leader, 10T

The Government has always wanted companies to pay for this education, and several ministers have tried, so that's always been a struggle. When college leaders look at developments in the labour market and the speed with which they happen, they think it should be possible to offer training programmes for people who are already working. Students don't study from 16 to 23 and then they're ready for everything. It's not possible.

The college's first aim is to give the best education possible, so they are putting a lot of effort in quality improvement. That's the first aim. Their second aim is cooperation with firms, because you can't give vocational training when you don't have contacts with firms. So they are trying to improve cooperation between the labour market and the school. That's very important too. And third, they try to help those who are less able or

have reduced access to education. College leaders say they try to do the best for the weaker in society, in the labour market and in school. The college works hard at getting these groups to a certificate, so that they can go to the labour market. Companies do not always share these values.

For most companies, it doesn't matter if the people they recruit can become good citizens and manage themselves in the future.

College Leader, 10T

We make our own decisions

If an industry offers no employment prospects in the local area, the college doesn't offer vocational training in that field. The government takes this further by linking student numbers to local jobs. The college translates these targets through the lens of their own ethical compass; their values; their way of looking at students. According to the government, the college should train only 40 sports training or hairdressing students every year. But college leaders are aware that there are 60 students who want to study hairdressing. They accept them on the course because they know that not all will become hairdressers. And those who don't will still find their own way in society afterwards. For these students, it's the only way for them to have an education and a social context in the workplace, liberating them from their own social context. The diploma is a starting point. Everyone must have one before starting work. But more importantly, the diploma affects a young person's self-confidence. They are a success: they have graduated! The government says they should train to be a plumber, welder or builder because there is a lot of work in these areas, but not all young people want to study these trades. Some want to do hairdressing or sports science and won't do anything else. If the college did not offer these extra student places, it would lead to far bigger social problems later.

One of the big questions of the government is 'are you giving training for a profession that really exists?' One of the schools here is School for Sports. Sports – sports teacher ... trainer. And then you have to decide – can we have fewer students on that course? But we make our own ... decisions. Because government says no, you only need 40 students every year, so 40

is enough. And we say, well maybe 60 students is possible, because the course helps students to find their own way in society. And they want to study and if we don't bring them to school ... they won't do anything else, and the problem will be bigger ... for them, so we make our own decisions.

College Leader, 10T

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