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# Informing the future

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The first year of FETL Fellowships

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The Further Education Trust for Leadership's Fellowships offer FE and Skills practitioners an opportunity to pursue a research interest that benefits further education in the UK. The Fellowships take up to six months, during which time the Fellows are supported by FETL trustees and a prestigious higher education research institution to develop work that will support change in the sector. The first year of the Fellowship programme is coming to a close, with a new round due to open soon. Here, we introduce the founding Fellows and their work and share what they have achieved.

Their work will add to the growing body of knowledge in the sector, introducing important new thinking about managing risk, leading creatively, supporting part-time teachers and the challenges facing the leaders of third-sector learning providers. FETL believes that it is only by making itself better understood and taking ownership of the leadership of thinking about FE and Skills that the sector can secure its future. To do that, we need to create time for the leaders of our institutions to reflect and be creative. That is what FETL and its Fellowship programme are all about.

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## The Fellows

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

## A space to think in turbulent times

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

# Ruth Allen



**FETL gave me the freedom, time and space to sit back and think about how we can change things,' says Ruth. Her work began with a 'personal passion' about how people use their creativity in the workplace.**

How, she asked, could a creative culture be fostered within a further education setting, where policy turbulence and accountability pressures make the creation of collaborative, imaginative workplaces particularly challenging? Ruth gathered primary data from her own college, using a collaborative approach which engaged staff in the process and ensured senior leaders were on board from the start. She uncovered a complex picture of the 'enablers' and 'disablers' of creativity. To foster a creative culture in an FE college, she concluded, a number of factors must be present, including a clear articulation of values and vision, a strategy in which all staff are stakeholders, and creative leadership styles, supported by leadership development programmes.

Ruth's research led to the development of a tool that can be used by colleges to assess their current creative capability. It has been well received by her college, with some of the recommendations already implemented. Ruth has been given space and time to continue thinking about creativity in the college. 'I aimed to supply something that didn't just talk

about what creativity looked like but also showed people how they could change things,' Ruth says. 'I enjoyed the whole experience. I was lucky that the college gave me time and space to do it. It meant leaving my previous role to immerse myself properly in reading and engaging with staff and to feel I was giving something back, not only to the sector, through FETL, but to the college, which did a lot to support me. It was a really special thing to be able to do.'

## Key learning points

- By embedding a culture of creativity within an FE setting, the capability of an organisation to steer its way through, and even capitalise on, turbulence is much improved.
- To foster a creative culture, leaders must clearly articulate their values and vision, and support others in having the creative ideas that will take the organisation in the desired direction.
- Everyone within a college should be a stakeholder in its vision and strategy. By proactively engaging staff in shaping the vision and in solving problems or responding to opportunities, leaders can embed organisational strategy and vision at all levels.

# Ann Creed



**Ann's study examined how leadership styles and behaviours affect the attitudes and wellbeing of part-time tutors in outreach settings and impact on delivery in the classroom.**

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

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

## Key learning points

- Mutual trust and cooperation are the 'deal breakers' when it comes to ensuring a successful working relationship between part-time teaching staff and their managers. It is fundamental to teacher wellbeing.
- Leadership styles and behaviours that support teacher wellbeing and effective practice focus on student progress and outcomes and reflect both an understanding of teaching and learning and a respect for the work teachers do.
- Leader effectiveness in promoting high-quality learning is not only about practical resourcing but also concerns the ways in which leader behaviour influences teachers' personal self-esteem and confidence.

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# Alex Day



**'It was exciting to be one of the first FETL Fellows,' Alex says. 'It was great to be involved in shaping something for the future, particularly when it's so important in terms of developing independent thinking.'**

Alex examined risk behaviour among sixth-form college leaders and how it impacts on decision-making. There is already a large literature on risk management and she had to read widely and critically to understand the different components of risk and to unravel the often confusing use of terminology in the field. It was a difficult topic but she had two strokes of luck. 'The first was finding out a consultancy had put together an online psychological test for risk type and risk attitude, which I was able to use. The other breakthrough was finding that David Hillson, an internationally renowned expert on risk, lived 15 miles down the road from me. I was able to meet with him and talk through what I was doing in my research. He helped me refine some of the questions I put to leaders.'

Alex's findings pointed up the need for a 'culture shift' in thinking about risk in further education towards seeing it as an opportunity rather than a threat. Colleges, she argues, should adopt a risk and opportunity management process which incorporates both. 'The risk management process could be a barrier towards creating a more entrepreneurial culture in our colleges. If we can't create an entrepreneurial culture in our colleges, with hundreds and thousands of young people coming through our doors, how do we ensure we have an entrepreneurial culture in society.' Alex found the opportunity

to work closely with the other Fellows and with the FETL team particularly rewarding. 'I have a tremendous appreciation for their different skills and it has been really enriching to hear their different perspectives. I hope I'm going to be part of it in the future. I'd like to give something back and connect with the organisation as it grows.'

## Key learning points

- Current risk management processes in colleges mean that even where leaders accept that risk management is about threats and opportunities they maintain a focus on the threats and ignore the opportunities. Colleges should adopt a risk-and-opportunity management process that incorporates opportunities as well as threats.
- Colleges should define their risk appetite (the level of risk that is generally acceptable) based on an understanding of the trade-offs between high- and low-risk appetites and the history and culture of the college. Overall, colleges should work towards a balanced portfolio of upside and downside risks.
- There is evidence that principals are more likely to be in risk-taking categories than other members of their senior leadership team. A mix of risk-taking types may help ensure the overall disposition of the group to risk is well moderated.

# Tim Ward

**For Tim, the freedom FETL gave him to reshape and adapt his research as he went along was particularly important.**

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

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



sector that is under-appreciated and poorly understood. 'It's a topic I'm passionate about. It's important that the work of these organisations is recognised. It's important to tell that story.'

## Key learning points

- Current models of vocational learning and skills do not take account of the work of third-sector providers or their important contribution to both social inclusion and the economy. This has a negative impact on their ability to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged and excluded.
- There is tension between the needs and mission priorities addressed by these providers and the public policy and funding systems. The Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency should consider how funding and management systems can be better aligned to the characteristics of third-sector providers to get the best value from their distinctive contribution.
- More research is needed to capture the characteristics, value systems and behaviours which enable third-sector organisations to work so successfully with disadvantaged learners.

## Future Fellowships

FETL and its Fellows have been on a remarkable journey in their first year. What happens next is up to you. We want to hear from as wide a range of voices as possible about the key issues facing the sector. You might want to follow up some of the emerging themes of the first round of Fellowships – focusing perhaps on how leaders can create collaborative, creative workplaces in spite of the pressures of accountability, reduced

budgets and restructuring, or on how the work of under-appreciated parts of the sector, such as third-sector providers, can be better recognised and understood – or examine another area altogether. It's a central part of FETL's working ethos that you get to set the agenda.

If you are interested in a FETL Fellowship then visit our website to find out more and to sign up for our mailing list to be notified when applications are open. [www.fetl.org.uk](http://www.fetl.org.uk).