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# LEADERS' VOICES

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WICKED CHALLENGES AND THE  
EMERGENCE OF THE SUPER COLLEGE

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# ABOUT FETL

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The Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) is a unique charity and independent think tank whose purpose is to enable the development of the leadership of thinking in further education and skills. Our vision is of a further education and skills sector that is valued and respected for:

- Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers;
- Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
- Sharing fresh ideas generously and informing practice with knowledge.

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# FOREWORD

Dame Ruth Silver

**I am delighted that FETL is publishing this speech by Paul Little, delivered at the first International Education Symposium at his inspiring City of Glasgow College in October 2016, as the first in our new 'Leader's voices' series. It is gratifying to be able to share Principal Little's ideas and ambition more widely not only because they represent a fitting statement of self-confidence and resilience in challenging times, but also because the sector badly needs to hear what its leaders are thinking, while the wider world of FE and skills needs to learn from how its best and brightest are adapting to often quite profound change. For FETL, it has never been enough simply to mobilise the voices of the academics and advocates. We want to hear from the sector's leaders too.**

The notion of a new series capturing the voices of leaders in the sector, including leaders close to the chalkface, whether in colleges or the independent sector, is an exciting one. It offers an opportunity for leaders to find a wider audience for their ideas, beyond the usual conference crowd; to reach parts of the sector normally untouched by what is discussed at high-level events and seminars. And it gives people working in the sector a chance to find out what those leading them think and believe and to engage with that thinking. Just as the late writer and art critic John Berger talked about different 'ways of seeing' we want to encompass all the different 'ways of talking', within and about the sector.

Principal Little offers a sharp, well-informed snapshot of what is going on in the FE and skills landscape at the moment, scanning not only the Scottish scene but the wider world of UK further education. It is at once a helpful

critique of prejudice about the FE and skills system, a diagnosis of the very significant challenges facing the sector, and a celebration of what it is capable of achieving. In setting out his stall, Principal Little describes his own institution's bold and far-sighted response to the range of 'wicked' challenges he identifies. We reproduce the speech in full, as it was given, editing only where necessary to adapt the text to the printed page.

We hope the series will be widely disseminated and discussed but its success depends more than usually on its readers, people working in and around the sector, letting us know when they hear something which they think should be published more widely or when they encounter ideas they think simply must be shared or engaged with by a broader or different audience. We have our own ideas about the next few publications in the series but would very much like to hear from you to ensure it is as varied and interesting as possible. Do please get in touch and share your own ideas.

# WICKED CHALLENGES AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE SUPER COLLEGE

Paul Little

This paper was delivered by Paul Little, Principal and CEO of City of Glasgow College, at the inaugural International Education Symposium on 26 October 2016. It launched an event which, perhaps uniquely, brought together experts from across the world at a college event, in a college setting, to discuss high-level strategic issues concerning tertiary education.

It also marked the official launch of City of Glasgow College's inspiring new £228 million campus, dubbed, without exaggeration, 'a super-campus to rival the very best anywhere in the world'.

FETL is delighted to reproduce Principal Little's speech here and to share it more widely within the sector and beyond it, in the first of this series capturing the voices of leaders around the sector. It was a fitting, self-confident and timely statement of intent in a time when colleges and independent training providers across the UK are negotiating unprecedented levels of change from multiple directions.

**I was struck, on a walk around Glasgow, by how some of our older, more mercantile buildings suddenly stood out and caught my attention in the evening glow. It inspired me to reflect on the metaphor of shifting light and, in particular, on the shifting spotlight in the post-reform tertiary education sector.**

Our universities have enjoyed being promoted in the media limelight by their journalist alumni and feted by well-lobbied government ministers, keen to appease the aspirational clamour of the middle classes.

Elsewhere in the tertiary sector, however, our equally deserving colleges, which have been largely under-promoted since their inception as mechanics' institutes in the nineteenth century, work diligently for the benefit of their students, often in the shadows of working-class communities, and are feted by a considerably less vocal minority of metropolitan liberals.

Social science graduates will, at this juncture, no doubt reflect that, whether you identify yourself as one of the proverbial 'elite' or as part of the 'lumpen', we are generally all creatures of habit, of familiar cultural contexts, and, as such, are inherently prone to lazy assumptions and biases. In the hyper-connected digital world of today, we further insulate ourselves from different perspectives by comforting ourselves in our LinkedIn filter bubbles and Facebook echo chambers. These, of course, allow us more easily to ignore the facts and realities that we don't like and instead reinforce a personalised narrative that conveniently fits our chosen world view.

Therefore, we should remember that, as we engender debate and discourse about the future of education, our inherent preconceptions will, ultimately, filter how we defend and value the two essential pillars of tertiary education. Too often, we allow our thinking about each component part to default to mere binary either/or descriptors, such as colleges or universities, FE or HE, two-year or four-year institutions, teaching or research.

However, in the real world outside our filter bubbles, the reality is rather different. And the facts now challenging our tertiary sector won't disappear simply because either we, or, for that matter, our partners, the policymakers, choose to downplay them.

Let's be clear, too, that students nowadays are much less interested in the bragging rights associated with whatever we want to call ourselves, whether it be universities, colleges, institutes or even polytechnics. Those are our sacred Institutional hierarchies as academics. Instead, the millennials are more interested in who we really are and how we can meet their individual learning goals with proper teaching, as well as in whether we really do represent value for money in their quest to gain the skills necessary to get a job, keep that job and, ultimately, get an even better job.

## Wicked challenges

Let us be clear too that our complacency in the known-knowns or even the known-unknowns of the education and training eco-system, are set to be fundamentally disrupted by any number of wicked twenty-first century challenges. Time will tell which of the two halves of our public tertiary sector will be agile and adaptive enough to evolve, survive and even thrive in this new landscape.

Let me offer a brief review of these impending wicked challenges.

I will start with the clear and present danger presented by Brexit and the threat it poses both to international recruitment and to European research hubs; a threat that is further compounded by this Conservative Government's self-sabotaging of the UK higher education brand.

Surely, too, the very survival of some of the so-called post-92 universities or smaller specialist higher education institutions must now hang precariously in the balance, especially following the introduction of the TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework) and the recent publication of the White Paper in England, further commoditising higher education with the introduction of 'challenger' institutions, to offer degrees faster and more flexibly.

Home Secretary Amber Rudd banged in yet another nail with her two-tier visa system intended to 'ensure our world leading institutions can attract the brightest and the best, while looking at tougher rules for students on lower quality courses'.

These sectoral challenges are, of course, a mere backdrop to the plight of an increasingly impoverished and indebted millennial generation, saddled, as they now are, with \$1.26 trillion of student debt in the US (2016) and £86.2 billion in the UK (2016). Around 50 per cent will never ever be able to pay this debt off. In our consumer-driven world it is a shocking fact to realise that levels of student debt have now surpassed credit card debt and car loan debt.

Moreover, in our so-called 'gig' economy an undergraduate degree now costs 14 times more than it did for a 'baby-boomer' in the sixties. Nowadays, too, our own college Higher National Diploma, once a valued formal qualification for direct employment, is now a stepping stone to articulation onto an honours degree course, seen as the gold standard.

The must-have qualification of degree has itself become devalued and is now seen more as the operative-level qualification for entry into the jobs market.

## Elitist Scotland

Of course, the one per cent of elite graduates studying in our 50 premier institutions are largely insulated from the impact of these worrying statistics for they will continue to enjoy their choice of jobs and a guaranteed pathway to the top echelons of corporate or public life.

Here in Scotland, a 2015 report by the David Hume Institute, *Elitist Scotland?*, found that almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of those in top jobs in Scotland who attended institutions in the UK went to an elite university, with just over a half going to one of our four ancient Scottish universities. Furthermore, nearly nine out of 10 of top civil servants in Scotland attended one of these four ancient Scottish universities, or Oxbridge or Russell Group universities.

So, what of the future for graduates, especially college graduates who make up one in five of all HE graduates in Scotland and, of which City of Glasgow College teaches by far the lion's share?



Interestingly, an *Economist* article, 'The world is going to university – but is it worth it?', reported that the share of the global student-age population at university has more than doubled in the past two decades from 14 per cent to 32 per cent, with the number of countries now with a 50 per cent ratio of the student-age population at university rising in the same period from five to 54.

Drilling into the figures with more granularity, recent data from the UK's Office for National Statistics reveals that university graduates from our higher-branded institutions start on average with salaries of £16.5k rising to £30k after 10 years, while college or lower-quartile university graduates start life with much lower salaries of £11.5k rising only to £20k a decade later.

Refocusing on the other end of the proverbial telescope from the perspective of our employers, they see our tertiary sector supply chain as creating confusion and compromising their fourth industrial revolution.

Make no mistake: Industry 4.0 will demand even greater Productivity gains of between 10 per cent and 20 per cent. It will demand much greater optimisation through automation. The digital disruption characterised by the internet of things could ultimately wipe out around half of all those entry or operative jobs in less than 10 years.

Take another example here in Scotland. Our digital disruption could see the displacement of our traditional North Sea energy market by our gaming technology market and, with that, such global brands as Minecraft and Grand Theft Auto. Indeed, as we speak, German scientists are pioneering super-intelligent machine learning that will harness the ultra-realistic imagery of these digital games to teach prototype driverless cars how not to kill.

There is disruption too in youth employment. In my lifetime, the growth in intergenerational inequality and unemployment has grown stark. A report released recently by the Institute for Fiscal Studies notes that young adults now in their thirties are only half as rich as those of the same age a decade earlier due to the threefold decline in home ownership, stalling wages and rising pension contributions. Our millennial generation – 'generation bust' – lose about £35 billion in wages every year to support their retired parents, grandparents and great grandparents.

Of course, those millennials in full-time employment are actually the lucky ones. In our developed nations about a third of our young workforce are in either temporary or intermittent employment. In our poorer nations, according to the World Bank, a fifth of our young find themselves acting as unpaid family workers.

Overall, the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimate that around 290 million 15–24-year-olds in the world today are neither working nor studying. This represents a quarter of our youth on this planet today.

## Colleges 4.0

Faced with all of these 'wicked' challenges, I now believe that we are fast reaching a real tipping point, both nationally and internationally. We are also on the cusp of imminent disruption within tertiary education.

For that reason, City of Glasgow College is effectively role-modelling an agile solution to the challenges faced by tertiary education in our volatile, uncertain, ambiguous and complex new world. The college is the first of a new breed of super colleges, or what I call 'Colleges 4.0'.

The new super colleges will be characterised by our demand-led personalised learning approach, in our case taught in 100 industry academies: powerhouses of technical, professional or digital skills, replacing our former academic departments. The super colleges, super-sized in scale and influence, are also shaping industries and co-creating value through innovation and applied research. These new super institutions take the long view in their corporate planning, future-proofed for the next 50 years.

In redefining a new era of Scottish college education, which some claim is five years ahead of its peers elsewhere in UK, City of Glasgow College is both unique and bold in its strategic ambition.

Firmly committed to the possibility of the college as a world-class institution both in outlook and in performance, we now dare within our tertiary sector to be different, we dare to lead, we dare to innovate, to redefine, to be a catalyst for transformational rather than incremental change. We confidently aspire to be among the top-performing colleges in the world, safeguarding access for the many not the few.

We dare to inspire our technicians and our apprentices with participation in national and international skills proficiency competitions, such as Euroskills, the Americas Nations Cup and WorldSkills.

In a super college, students learn in an intelligent and technologically rich and sustainable thin-client environment, where they are encouraged to bring their own learning devices and we tell them to turn their mobile phones on in class rather than have them switch them off.

Our next-generation super college makes greater use of colour, lighting, acoustics and indoor air quality to enhance staff and student performance, health and wellbeing. A recent independent impact study validates our new approach.

Our super college nurtures a global brand collaborating with more than 50 international partners to add real value to grow talent, prosperity and the competitive capacities of our city region and our national economy.

A super college with a laser-like focus on technical and professional skills has greater economies of scale to endure the onslaught of the technological revolution and its concurrent socio-economic and demographic challenges.

A super college is also better placed to prepare its graduates for intermediate-level or technician jobs that will remain vital, though they too will of course evolve.

We have not allowed the traditionalists, the narrow-sighted policymakers or our geography to determine our destiny.

We have developed our skills of prescience and actively look at what might happen in the future as a basis for envisioning our pedagogic response.

Our success was never inevitable. We worked extremely hard and then some to make this happen. Our world of possibility became a destiny of our own making. To quote George Bernard Shaw, 'It's a sort of splendid torch I have hold of for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.'

When you truly find your passion and your purpose you achieve great things. Our passion and purpose is to let learning flourish. For what we have achieved collectively is not just for Glasgow but for Scotland, for the UK and beyond.

I conclude with philosopher Iain McGilchrist who pointedly reminded us that:

*"We shouldn't be in the business of creating better machines but better people ... Education isn't about one thing; it is about a relationship. It isn't about one size fits all; it's about uniqueness. It is not about abstractions; it is about embodied learning. And it is about the implicit being as important as the explicit."*



**Paul Little** is Principal and  
CEO of City of Glasgow College



**Published January 2017**  
**The Further Education Trust for Leadership**

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