



COLLEGES AS ANCHORS IN THEIR SPACES

A study in college
leadership of place

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FOREWORD

Dame Ruth Silver

This is a timely report that examines college leadership through the lens of the changing role of colleges as leaders of place. As the authors note, the past decades have been ones of near-constant turbulence in the further education sector, creating new challenges for college leaders, in terms both of managing cycle after cycle of sometimes ill-conceived change and of rethinking their mission and approach to survive and succeed in a brave new world in which collaboration rather than competition is becoming key.

The college sector looks very different today than it did when I first joined it. Part of this process of change has been the deepening of colleges' role in their communities, as well as a growing recognition, regionally and locally, that further education has something significant to contribute to the economic, social and civic growth of their localities.

It is important that we understand these changes, the impact they are having on the ground, and how – and with what values – leaders are responding. For that reason, I am particularly pleased to find that this report begins in listening mode. What strikes me from the very detailed interviews conducted with colleagues in each of the four nations is the thoughtful and serious-minded contribution college leaders are making at local and regional levels, while remaining clear and clear-sighted about their own mission to lead learning.

Most of the challenges of the future, from climate change to economic renewal, can be met only through partnership and collaboration. We can no longer afford to live in echo chambers, talking – and listening – only to ourselves and those of like mind. This means making ourselves open and vulnerable to others, including those we disagree with, accepting and making criticism, and being prepared to listen and learn, continuously and inclusively. It is increasingly important that we find ways to do our thinking *together*.

Listening is often the key to being trusted and valued as a partner. We can no longer afford to operate in silos, hoarding our treasures in the dark. Instead, we need to ensure no opportunity or resource is wasted or overlooked as we strive to build sustainable, prosperous futures.

The college leaders interviewed for this project demonstrate how colleges can effectively – and creatively – lead across their regions and localities. They also highlight the specific challenges this emerging, and still untested, climate of cooperation poses for leaders, from the distinctive perspectives of their local geographies.

It is important to realise that the picture here is very uneven. Not every college has been able to position itself at the heart of local 'system thinking'; not everyone recognises the important contribution colleges and other providers have to make here. Equally, we should note that solutions must be adapted to local environments. One size no longer fits all. The trick is to deepen this very welcome shift to increased local devolution and collaboration, while sharpening our own capacities (and those of our partners) by sharing and debating good practice such as that described here.

Dame Ruth Silver is President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership

INTRODUCTION

This study in developments in college leadership was carried out against a background of rapid evolution in the nature of technical colleges, sometimes described as further education (FE) colleges, across the four nations of the United Kingdom (UK). The devolution of powers to the Scottish and Welsh Assemblies (1999) and the Northern Ireland Assembly (2007) set in train a process of divergence in the nature of technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and the colleges that provided it, across the four nations. In England, change has been prompted recently by a series of Area Based Reviews,¹ established to promote a rationalisation in regional skills provision. There has also been a renewal of interest, both internationally² and nationally³, in the relationship between TVET and work for a future economy that will increasingly be transformed by the progressive introduction of artificial intelligence. Across the UK also there is concern, as we write, about the provision of skills in a future where the free movement of labour across the European Union may be restricted.

Despite divergence, there are common themes within the FE college context, set in motion by rationalisation, merger, scale, a reduction in the impact of the quasi market, and a renewed focus on work-related provision. At the centre of this investigation are six interviews with a cross-section of influential college leaders, who were invited to reflect on the changing nature of

1 Reviewing post-16 education and training institutions: updated guidance on area reviews BIS/16/118

2 <https://t20argentina.org/the-future-of-work-one-of-the-main-ideas-discussed-at-the-first-meeting-between-ministers-of-finance-and-presidents-of-central-banks-of-the-g20> (accessed April 2019)

3 Education Committee inquiry into the challenges posed and opportunities presented by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, May 2018

their role, both within the region in which they are located and within the colleges that they lead. This study identifies varying and developing demands on the role of college leadership and radical changes in the nature of their work in recent years, as they respond to a new landscape in the provision of technical education in the UK.

The interviewees were: Debra Gray (Grimsby Institute), Paul Little (City of Glasgow College), Guy Lace (Coleg Gwent), Peter Mayhew-Smith (South Thames Colleges Group), Marie-Thérèse McGivern (Belfast Metropolitan College) and Stuart Rimmer (East Coast College).

The authors express their gratitude for the honesty and candour, and for the generous time given by these college leaders.

THE EVOLUTION OF COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

Since college incorporation⁴ in 1992, the FE sector in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and the college sector in Scotland, while evolving in different ways, have all grown in scale, scope and complexity and have expanded to align with economic rather than local political regions. We will argue that the colleges represented in this study have become more valued and more integrated within their localities. In addition, their leaders each play a pivotal role in regional 'system thinking'. The nature of college leadership is being reformed. Nowadays, the sheer scale of colleges calls for leadership skills of a higher order than those required 25 years ago. Such executive leadership is also now context specific. Leading a professional workforce of 1,500 while being personally accountable for a budget in excess of £60 million requires radically different corporate skills than those required for leading a more local and smaller institution, where it was possible to regularly meet your entire staff team. College leaders are, thus, major metropolitan and/or regional players with very significant influence on political, civic and economic decision-making. They are helping to co-create a resurgent regional identity and, by so doing, are forging a new sense of purpose and alignment within their tertiary institutions. Leaders are drawing on this identity to create frameworks of principle and priority that help guide managers within the colleges as they respond to, and act upon, the circumstances that surround them. These leaders seek to distribute authority and share decision-making more loosely, helping create a commonality across these large institutions. The boundaries of college leaders'

⁴ FE colleges were incorporated through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. The powers of FE corporations are set out in this Act.

activity are now much more permeable, with their provision constantly adapting to or proactively shaping the economic and civic priorities of their respective regions. Thus, college leaders are increasingly being required to become catalysts and leaders of regional thinking.

College incorporation sparked complex interactions; it promised unhindered freedom, yet only in very limited circumstances did it ultimately come to mean self-determination. Over the years, FE actually has become a more co-ordinated environment – waves of regulation, scrutiny and sectoral restructuring across the four nations,⁵ combined with Regionalisation and Reclassification in Scotland and, in England, the Area Based Reviews, coupled with interventions from an FE Commissioner, have removed any remaining institutional autonomy.⁶ However, despite such relentless transformational reform, colleges, and in particular their leaders, have shown remarkable resilience, exemplary agility and an abiding commitment to the communities they serve.

On the whole, FE colleges have changed their profile and grown massively. This significant increase in scale has been driven through mergers, some voluntary, some imposed. Each merger has aligned its structures to prevailing political and regional conditions, with some of the new institutions retaining local brands while others emerged as new corporate identities. The resulting organisations have evolved differently across all four nations of the UK, with distinct organisational patterns. Some became corporate groupings, some regional hubs with training providers or school academies, and others metropolitan benchmarks. The LTE Group (Manchester College) emerged in 2016, with a reported turnover of £187 million, and staff of 3,450. Figures in excess of £60 million (around 1,500 staff) are

5 See Hodgson, A., Spours, K., Waring, M., Gallacher, J, Irwin, T. and James, D. 2018. FE and skills across the four countries of the UK: New opportunities for policy learning. *Journal of Education and Work*.

6 See Spours, K., Hodgson, A., Grainger, P. and Smith, D. 2018. Post-16 Area-Based Reviews in London: A small step towards a more universal and coherent skills system in the Capital? London: Association of Colleges. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*.

not unusual for city-located colleges.⁷ In part, this has led to a second trend: a reduced intensity of the quasi-market that had been intentionally established across the UK in the early 1990s. Colleges, once locked in fierce area or regional competition, now find themselves consolidated in the same, larger institution. Some independent training providers have joined college groups, while others occupy very specific, non-competitive niches. Regional collaborations with schools have also developed, particularly at the senior phase. In some cases, it is clear that over-supply in the marketplace forced consolidation, preferring merger over closure. Competition ultimately proved to be a luxury in a declining market for public-sector provision. In general, there is no longer a national drive towards a one-size-fits-all tertiary solution within a single institution catering for all 16–18 year olds. In England, many FE colleges no longer replicate the offer of local sixth forms, thus reducing competition and choice. In the other countries of the UK, there has been a resurgence of the tertiary idea in response to regional circumstances, and as a clear civic expression of self-determination in response to the demands of devolution.⁸ Either way, the original tendency of incorporation towards intense win-lose competition has been replaced by greater inter- and intra-regional or area collaboration, particularly in the Celtic nations⁹, but given impetus recently in England by a slow and sometimes reluctant movement towards devolution. While some college leaders continue to resist the notion of regional planning, in general close regional ties, with policy determined locally through democratic systems, appears to be the prevailing trend.

On the other hand, and specifically in England, displacement and direct competition with universities may be on the rise as some higher education institutions (HEIs), desperate to recruit to target, lower their entry requirements and, in effect, enter more

7 Source: Stephen Exley and Julia Belgutay, *TES*, 12 May, 2017.

8 See Little, P. 2018. New Frontiers in College Education, in *New Frontiers for College Education: International Perspectives*, Routledge.

9 Hodgson, A., Spours, K., Waring, M., Gallacher, J, Irwin, T. and James, D. 2018. *FE and skills across the four countries of the UK: New opportunities for policy learning*. *Journal of Education and Work*.

traditional college markets. Across the four nations the broad direction of travel for colleges is given some added impetus in England by a slow process of devolution to combined authorities. Closer regional ties, with policy determined regionally through integrated systems, appears to be proving good for colleges and good for their regions.

REGIONAL STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP: SIX COLLEGE CASES

Scale alters the mood music of words that are traditionally associated with leadership. The term 'vision' is an effective word to capture the foresight required to ensure collaboration and alignment to achieve an aspiration towards an envisaged outcome. But the scale of the expected outcome also influences both the burden of responsibility, and the complexity of the collaboration required to mould impactful alliances.

Marie-Thérèse McGivern, Principal and CEO of **Belfast Metropolitan College**, has a vision intimately interwoven into the very fabric of Belfast; a city, like others in our survey, with a proud industrial heritage. The political situation in Belfast is however more complex than in other major UK cities. At the time of our interview,¹⁰ the power-sharing arrangements within the Northern Ireland Assembly had not been re-established, thus leaving Northern Ireland without a devolved government for the past two years. Despite a successful peace process, the community remains deeply divided. McGivern has to work across six political parties, activity that takes up a large amount of time. Her background is, however, rooted in Belfast politics, her previous role being with Belfast City Council as director of development. She is well-used to working with civic leaders. For example, she chairs the Employability and Skills Group for the City Deal. This is pivotal, as poverty continues to impact upon the citizens of Belfast, and particularly the young,¹¹ which creates potentially destabilising pressures on social cohesion and civic structures. The city's priorities are skills, training, and

¹⁰ Interview, 5 February 2019

¹¹ *Hard Times 2014*, a report by the ESRC Research Project, Poverty and Social Exclusion: www.poverty.ac.uk/community/northern-ireland/cia/hard-times (accessed April 2019).

employability. The college is at the heart of addressing all of these. At the time of her appointment, McGivern felt that the close bond of affinity with the city was missing. The college was in difficulty and needed transformation and reconnection. Over time, things, however, have changed significantly. The college has roughly 20,000 students and is now a major player in the city; widely recognised as an anchor at the centre of the city region skills system, and at the centre of the regeneration of the Titanic Quarter.

Coleg Gwent, on the other hand, has more of a regional identity, embracing the city and unitary authority of Newport, but extending to surrounding rural areas. This gives the college a different profile to that of a metropolitan college in that the various client groups often come from disparate geographical spaces. Guy Lacey, Principal and CEO,¹² illustrates his disparate clientele as coming 'from dairy farmers in Usk to a series of multi-national companies', which are located across the five local authorities of South Wales. The college maintains, deliberately, a site in each local authority. Lacey's influence is exerted at a range of political and civic fora, at Welsh Government level, in the Cardiff capital region, and through the five local authorities. The geographical footprint of Coleg Gwent is different to that of colleges such as Belfast Metropolitan College, but the scale and the impact on the regional economy is similar.

This impact has grown in recent years as the college has become increasingly successful in managing the gap between aspiration and reality. From a narrow approach to regeneration, centred on a nostalgia for the past, epitomised with short-sighted developments such as a spend on a new shopping mall or bridge, the city of Newport has now developed a new strategic direction influenced by Lacey. Together, they are learning the art of 'listening', analysing local employment trends rather than imposing aspirational, but unrealistic, development. Civic leaders are building on projects and skill sets that have traction to role

¹² Interview, 12 February 2019

model sustainable growth. They also now recognise that a high-tech economy is rapidly moving down the M4, from London into Bristol and onwards to Wales. The college has, therefore, established a close dialogue with the city of Newport, moving the regeneration thrust away from its previous nostalgic view of the city's maritime past towards sustainability, developing high-order technical and craft skills not just for newly developing industries, as a National Network College, or as a National Catapult,¹³ but also in improving the quality of those social industries that also underpin the resurgent community: care, restaurants and retail. Lacey has also helped influence the Welsh Government to develop the National Composites Centre at Ebbw Vale, where the college has launched an Advanced Materials Centre.¹⁴ It also played a leading role in attracting the Construcciones y Auxiliar de Ferrocarriles (CAF) railways assembly and testing plant to Newport and enabled graduate engineers to upskill at the Bristol Advanced Engineering Centre. Technicians with a background in traditional fabrication and welding can now be retrained to work with composites. The college is helping to grow a regional network of competence which embraces high-order engineering skills with niche digital industries such as mobile phone manufacture and cyber security.

Lacey describes his context as 'regional, but with a lot of parochialism'. No doubt that statement sums up much of the UK, but in the case of Coleg Gwent it is in a sound position to shape a successful outcome. He has been persistent in confronting the poor understanding of colleges by local government leaders, both at political and executive level, to the point now where the college sits at the heart of the regional regeneration debate. He has marshalled and established an understanding that skills at levels 3, 4 and 5 are crucial for sustaining a viable local economy. Lacey sits on Cardiff Capital Region Education and Skills Board and SE Region principal's group (of five), and the

13 <https://hvm.catapult.org.uk/hvm-centres/national-composites-centre-ncc/> (Accessed 5 March 2019)

14 <https://www.nccuk.com/ncc-news/national-composites-centre-aids-coleg-gwent-ebbw-vale-launch-first-introduction-composites> (Accessed 4 March 2019).

Newport cross-business and local authority group, the Newport Economic Network. As with Belfast, the college is investing in the regeneration of the city of Newport, for example building a new campus in the town centre. The college is now included in the Newport development plan as the council works with the college, its officers and politicians, recognising its value to the city and the region.

The ***East Coast College*** supports a region similarly susceptible to parochialism, with a tendency towards nostalgia for the return to a more prosperous past. This was founded on both the traditional maritime and fishing industries, and in recent times, in the off-shore gas industry. This latter is now in its decommissioning phase, but is being replaced, in part, by a substantial offshore wind farm development. The two towns of Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft, which the college serves, have differing histories and parochial tendencies, each with a borough authority. At present, politically there is a 'rainbow coalition' with a swing in Labour supporters towards UKIP. Stuart Rimmer, CEO and Principal,¹⁵ knows the local councillors well and often finds himself playing honest broker, when the political and civic leaders of the two towns are in disagreement. He sits on the skills board of the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and gives it his support. Surprisingly, and disappointingly, he thinks that the LEP discussions as to the purpose of education and its role in regeneration have been under-developed due the lack of recognition of the role of social inclusion in maintaining a balanced society and sustaining its economic viability. Social inclusion is a developed strength of the college, and Rimmer feels that this is not sufficiently recognised locally and that the voice of the college, expressed through his leadership, is heard despite the fact that LEP members tend to be more interested in the more distant regional centres of Ipswich and Norwich. He also sits on the Chamber of Commerce. Because the college is able to attract funding, it has gained local and regional clout – 'people answer the 'phone', he says. The college has been

¹⁵ Interview, 19 February 2019

effective in coordinating supply chains for both major local firms, and with SMEs. Rimmer singled out EDF as being a thoughtful, long-term planning partner. Senior staff proactively come and discuss matters with the college; having both local and national concerns. Nationally, they are competing for skills with other major infrastructure projects such as HS2 and Heathrow. Locally, they have skills planning strategies, such as sending employees to Hinckley Point with a view to long-term skills acquisition. Both college and employers are part of a structured, forward-planning policy whereby they can discuss a skills pipeline for the next few years. He feels that the off-shore industry is, regrettably, less organised and is insufficiently focused on the development of competencies in the local area. However, an Off-shore Wind Centre has now been developed to support the industry. Rimmer, who is relatively new in post, is hopeful that technical education can begin to establish its rightful place in regional economic planning.

Grimsby Institute serves a similar space in terms of addressing the skills and training needs of a declining sea port and a largely rural hinterland. The rapid post-war decline in the fishing industry has left the town with an acute need for regeneration and reinvention. In an area now largely devoid of big employers, the college is considered a huge player with its prominent central campus being a significant feature in the local landscape. The college has been growing since 2000, a process that pre-dates the present leadership team. Turnover of the corporate grouping is in the region of £45 million per annum, covering a wide radius of activity, from the Humber Estuary to Doncaster and north to Leeds. Since the merger with Yorkshire Coast College in 2010, the college group now extends down the east coast from Scarborough to Skegness, and inland to Leeds. Grimsby Institute is a consortium of a number of institutional types (e.g. university centre, technical college, training providers) to serve this extensive and complex space. The great balance of provision is located in Grimsby, an area much in need of the revitalisation that the college is leading.

Debra Gray, Principal and Deputy CEO,¹⁶ is certain that the college is now a key player in attracting inward investment. Gray sits on various education sub-boards. She feels too that the local authority has the right attitude. They work together to devise systems to help and support small enterprises. Grimsby Institute has developed a high-quality estate to support its dominant profile and professional brand. The institute has also introduced extensive HE provision to an area where progression to university has traditionally been low.

The ***South Thames Colleges Group*** presents yet a different profile and leadership approach to the foregoing. While the three constituent colleges of the group, with 20,000 students between them, serve differing socio-economic groupings characterised in the main by rising household incomes, but with significant exceptions. Households are mostly graduate, and the local economy is, in the main, a graduate economy. The area has perhaps the highest density of graduates in England. The constituent colleges of the group send around 1,500 a year to university. The area around Kingston has some of the most successful schools in the world. In addition, there are a large number of universities within the locality. The recent collapse in entry standards and rise in unconditional offers, has blurred the differentiation between university and this high-performing college, escalating further an intensely competitive regional market. The strategic response of Peter Mayhew-Smith, Principal and CEO,¹⁷ has been to strengthen local brand identities, together with a corporate narrative to stand out in this red ocean environment.

Mayhew-Smith describes a great deal of churn within his regional economy: relatively prosperous, full of innovation, high numbers of small businesses that 'flower and fade'. He has to interpret this fast-moving market place regularly, gleaning information from local authority officers, links with small firms and spin-off companies that may use training facilities, or from key

¹⁶ Interview, 7 February 2019

¹⁷ Interview, 6 February 2019

regional stakeholders some of whom are college governors. The Greater London Authority (GLA) also provides extensive data on economic activity and is now itself a funding agency for adult learning.¹⁸ This has given the GLA a platform, and an increased interest in vocational learning. The principal also maintains close contact with local public sector agencies such as hospitals and four local authorities. These are the primary source of civic authority within his region. However, Sutton and Kingston on the one hand, and Merton and Wandsworth, on the other, have very different demographic and cultural priorities. In engaging with them, Peter has to maintain a strategic equilibrium across diverse footfalls to keep his wide range of provision relevant.

The college is not a hub nor an 'anchor' in the sense of the large, city-based colleges. South Thames is located in an outer rim facing into the global gateway of London, but also into its commuter belt and leafy boroughs. Mayhew-Smith has developed this newly formed college group as a progressive institution, to facilitate articulations between schools and university or employment, while also skilling up adults for a dynamic economy requiring increasingly higher-order skills. In this regional economy dominated by small companies, there is a revolving door between the business and academic worlds and inflows and outflows of lecturing staff and students. In supporting progression, the college has developed a good fit to its operating space unlike the focus of local schools whose academic excellence is rather mis-matched with local employment needs. Mayhew-Smith points out that the careers service is a guidance, not a directive, system. They can but make suggestions. So, at times, vacancies in local employment do not match parental aspiration and, as a consequence, local skills provision.

Paul Little, Principal and CEO of **City of Glasgow College**, shared a vision¹⁹ around the regeneration and prosperity of Glasgow. This former second city of the Empire has a proud industrial and commercial history, but badly needed renewal, regeneration and

18 <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/skills-and-employment/skills-londoners/adult-education-budget-aeb> (Accessed April 2019)

19 Interview, 4 February 2019

reinventing. This required metropolitan collaboration across a large number of key players – Little reckons 200 for economic strategy alone. He is one of a group of trusted civic leaders who work with 2,000 employers, eight councils, three universities, two colleges, a Regional College Board, and a range of government departments. Together, they deliver a £1 billion ‘City Deal’. He refers to ‘Team Glasgow’, a group of passionate leaders who know and trust each other to act for the benefit of the city and the wider city region, and who share a common altruism. This approach does not preclude self-interest, but it is self-interest sustained by a sense of the greater common weal. Little calls it ‘trust’. In practical terms, maintaining Team Glasgow requires the skills of a convenor and enabler: not confined to one individual, but to a network of collaborative practice. This is sustained hard work, requiring both time and resources. Little delivered real ‘skin in the game’ with the pioneering and internationally acclaimed²⁰ £228 million super campus for 40,000 students in the heart of the city centre. The rejuvenated college emerged as an innovative anchor institution for local regeneration. Little is a member of the Glasgow Economic Leadership Group, the Glasgow partnership for economic growth, Deputy President of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce (a powerful force in Scotland), Member of the historic Merchants House and Member of the Trades (Guild) House City Centre Strategy Board, plus several Scottish and national roles.

He maintains close contact with the Scottish Government and the Holyrood Parliament and has, in effect, become, one of the ‘city fathers’. He finds the interchange useful, if relentless. What he describes as ‘upstream leadership’ gives weight to his authority to make the required changes internally at the college. The influence of his leadership, networking across economic hubs, is clearly exhibited in the micro-economy. His interaction with the Chamber of Commerce, a powerful group in Glaswegian political life, helps maintain a collaborative tradition in Glasgow and a sense of joined-up mercantile pride where political, civic and economic aspirations align.

20 Little, P. 2018. *New Frontiers in College Education*, in *New Frontiers for College Education: International Perspectives*, Routledge.

METROPOLITAN AND REGIONAL ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP

Both metropolitan and regional colleges are considered together in this section, as the focus is on college leadership within an identifiable space. However, it should be noted that the nature of that space differs across geo-economic scales, and especially so between city and more distributed settings.

Paul Little refers to Glasgow's 'triple helix', of economic, academic and civic activity. The **City of Glasgow College** has interests in each of these areas. The college brings higher technical and professional provision and postgraduate-level skills to this mix. Moreover, it makes an annual contribution of £1.5 billion gross value-added to the city's economy. In addition, as one of the city's largest employers, it has a core staff team of 1,500 delivering in over 2,000 programmes for 32,000 students, 58 per cent of whom come from outside Glasgow, or from 110 international partnerships. This is a significant contribution to an economic region, confident in its civic self-esteem as a real Northern powerhouse. The return to, and revitalisation of, the Clyde is also a good example of targeted collaboration to preserve and further develop the region's maritime and engineering skills base. Arguably, this great Scottish city and industrial bulwark of the UK had turned its back on the river as traditional maritime and riverbank industries declined. But the college has inspired a renaissance of regeneration and renewal, persuading politicians to look again to the river as both a national asset and a heritage brand, to reawaken the potential for seafaring and global trade in a new economic model. Indeed, the college proactively invested in technology five years ahead of industry to help re-shape the Scottish and UK maritime industry. The college is a founding

member of a very active Scottish maritime cluster.²¹ It trains a third of all officer cadets for the UK's merchant navy and works closely with the Merchant Navy Training Board to revitalise training for ratings apprenticeships. The college has been pivotal in a rejuvenation process that has reinvigorated the Clyde.

This sense of renewal and reinvestment spreads across to the city centre, with the establishment, in its oldest cathedral quarter, of a high-profile, state-of-the-art building described by the Guardian newspaper as 'a temple to vocational education', delivering high-order skills for the regional and national economy. The college is particularly strong in areas such as culinary arts, creative industries, logistics, STEM provision and innovation. This super-sized college is now an integral civic anchor to its dynamic, resurgent city.

The strategic pivot of the ***Belfast Metropolitan College*** to re-locate in the Titanic Quarter demonstrates a similar pattern of visionary leadership to secure a step change in regeneration. It was high risk. The former Belfast College had not been engaging fully with the city and had lacked a sense of civic commitment. The redevelopment of the Titanic area, now a world-class heritage icon, was a major strategic gamble for the city. In 2011, the college was one of the first institutions to move into this derelict, brown-field site as an anchor tenant. This was a major boost to the city's political strategy to develop a narrative especially for the next generation around the ambitious Titanic story. The city too had lost its way, but had chosen to re-invent itself as part of a new optimism for Northern Ireland emerging from 30 years of civic conflict. Where there was shipbuilding there are now innovative buildings and resurgent industries in digital applications, advanced manufacturing, tourism and cultural industries. Marie-Theresa McGivern worked closely with politicians to engender this new economic cycle, aimed at both economic regeneration and social inclusion. The city is re-assessing the skills that will be needed to support future employment, and the college is mapping out that provision.

²¹ <https://www.scottishmaritimecluster.com/>

McGivern feels strongly that college leaders need to be embedded locally and nationally. As with other colleges in the devolved nations of the UK, Belfast Metropolitan College sits within a managed rather than a marketised strategy for upgrading skills. The six colleges in Northern Ireland each have identified hubs to develop centres of excellence, coordinated through the Department of the Economy. Belfast Met has two: ICT and hospitality. These are part of a dynamic political process to rejuvenate a community, a Belfast plan that takes education and inclusion as its very starting point.

In a similar vein, Guy Lacey speaks of a 'duty of care' to offer regional leadership. Newport, for example, is an asylum dispersal area, creating zones of pronounced deprivation populated by highly vulnerable people. He feels the ***Coleg Gwent*** has a responsibility for providing them with a sustainable future. The college has to balance provision between the needs of inclusion and supporting high-tech regeneration. Over 20,000 students are distributed over the five college sites. Of these, those most in need of support, students at levels 1 and 2, are the least mobile. The college strategy is that, as students' progress to levels 3, 4 and 5, provision becomes more specialised. In this scattered region, it is important to reassure parents that the college has local roots and a common entitlement for all. This is expressed in a college prospectus that focuses on entitlement (including learning in Welsh). It has an identifiable mantra which reinforces the message, 'study near, go far'. The college's students are joining an escalator that gives them access to both the occupations that sustain regional society such as public services, health, care, retail, and to the emergent new high-skills employment that will re-develop the local economy, such as working in semiconductors, aerospace, and an interesting, expanding niche in cyber security. Lacey has a strong understanding of a regional system, the traditional merging with innovation. He senses a new civic pride in Newport, which was having a good FA Cup run at the time of our interview. Realising the importance of the college in sustaining the regional economy by local politicians and their

officers has been part of this renewal. He is actively working with them to create a sustainable and inclusive skills system which does not exclude anyone from the locality, and which is also not overly dependent on importing skills from elsewhere. As part of this strategy, Lacey has introduced a Career Colleges Trust cohort, the first in Wales, in part to address the number of pupils dropping out of school, in part to promote progression to higher-level study. Several surrounding local authorities are now in the process of closing school sixth forms. As a result, three of the five college sites will be tertiary institutions by 2020, providing an education for all young people. Coleg Gwent serves not a single city, but an identifiable corridor running from the Severn Bridge along the coast into Cardiff. While the college provides for learners through five sites, it has sought to generate a single college brand across 1,000 staff. There is a balancing act between duplication, particularly at the lower levels, to ensure a comprehensive service for the whole community, and specialisation, at the higher levels to promote access to specialised teaching and resources. The logistics are daunting. In general, staff are campus based. Business support staff (e.g. finance) are gathered on one site, while subject areas are distributed at need (e.g. health and social care is offered from four sites). Bringing staff into an integrated unit is an ongoing task for leadership. Lacey has approached this through two aspirational strands. First, the college has, through continuous dialogue, established a set of core values. Those working for the college know what is expected of them. Thus, management is about mentoring, not instruction. Many of the lecturers have come from industry and have brought commercial expectations of employed behaviour with them. The dialogue has been democratic, but guided towards a shared vision for the college. The second aspiration is for progression, through and ultimately out of the college. The college has the best learning outcomes in Wales. In this atmosphere of success, the prospectus is couched in terms of where your next move might be towards.

Both ***East Coast College*** and ***Grimsby Institute*** serve similar economic environments where former prosperity has been followed by a long period of decline. Both college leaders are acutely aware of their civic role in bringing prosperity back to these regions through developing a pipeline of skills to underpin regional employment. Stuart Rimmer speaks of his local leaders still looking to the sea, to its maritime and fishing industries, and the remains of a struggling tourism economy. There remains, however, a substantial food manufacturing and processing industry, which is a good source of apprenticeships, but which has a likely volatile future. The offshore gas industry brought a demand to the area for high-order skills, but this industry too has seen its day, and its present needs are the short-term skills of decommissioning. Some of these skills, Rimmer feels, might transfer to the developing off-shore windfarm. Interestingly, he finds the nuclear firm EDF the most rewarding for their sincere collaboration with the college. They take an inclusive approach to the wider regional economy. High-skill nuclear engineers are inevitably going to be brought in from elsewhere, but EDF is mindful to support the local economic infrastructure to provide the public services and supply chains necessary to support their major investment in a nuclear plant. In contrast, Rimmer feels that the LEP's current pursuit of innovation does not lead to a balance of sustainable skills. He feels that it is important to work towards developing a sustainable and inclusive regional economy. Otherwise, he thinks there is a danger of training young people with skills which require them to leave an area in which they would feel that have no prospects nor stake in its future. This is evidenced in the local sixth form college provision.

Rimmer is also aware of the skills profile in the region, where small firms have developed substantial supply chain competencies in, for example, project management and regulation compliance. Guy Lacey champions a balanced, inclusive regional economy. He realises that the ageing demographic will increasingly need a strong care sector. He, like Paul Little, is committed to the renewal of traditional industries

but in a revitalised context. He too established a maritime college with a strong industry identity. It is important for him that the college lecturers are also practitioners that can demonstrate competence, the credibility that they have actively worked on boats. This is true of all practical skill areas taught across the colleges in this study, where professional and technical learning is delivered by vocational experts, which helps maintain a local or regional economic network of practice where those in teaching, and those in industry, interact and maintain high-order skills within their specialisms. Debra Gray likewise is ambitious for Grimsby. She sees a college-specific role in the regeneration of her particular region. One major strand of this strategy has been the introduction of a substantial higher education provision within a university centre. Following a long period of decline, the town of Grimsby continues to have a very low self-image.²² Progression to university was difficult, Grimsby being a 'cold spot' in terms of higher education provision, with problems of access particularly for part-time students with family responsibilities. Grimsby Institute is, therefore, systematically addressing this learning need. It now has 1,500 undergraduates enrolled on programmes which meet regional skills needs. These HE students have a distinct profile, with an average age of 30, a high proportion of whom are carers, women and returning students. Over 60 per cent come from widening participation areas. They are preparing for careers in nursing, television, the creative industries, media, games and high-level freelance work or self-employment. This higher education strategy has been pivotal in providing the mid- and high-level skills that the regional Grimsby economy needs to recover from a series of economic blows. It has safeguarded vital infrastructural skills as required by the large health and care sector and start-up skills for the newly emerging high-tech sector. She is also alert to the impending collapse in the standards expected by some universities and how this might undermine her strategy. She fears that some students might be tempted away from demanding, high-skill technical courses into

22 <https://www.grimsbytelegraph.co.uk/news/more-third-children-living-poverty-1113445> (Accessed 8 March 2019)

nebulous university provision, to the detriment of the Grimsby economy.

In contrast, the three major constituent colleges that make up the **South Thames Colleges Group** serve one of the most prosperous locales in our study. This prosperity masks pockets of serious deprivation, at the upper end of the deprivation index in West London, making for a highly complex demographic profile. Communities like Tooting, St Helier, Hackbridge and Kingston's Cambridge Estate all have significant issues. Nevertheless, for the region as a whole, progression at 18 is predominantly to university, sometimes via the college. Recently, however, in common with colleges throughout England, the stability of the tertiary system has been disrupted by the collapse of university entrance standards and unprecedented numbers of unconditional offers being made. South Thames College is finding its own entrance standards regularly undercut, especially during the clearing process, by the more aggressive, recruiting universities. Kingston University has recently pulled out of a long-standing franchise arrangement with the college. However, in a further blurring of the distinction between HE and FE, in the same general locality, South Bank University has recently acquired Lambeth College. This is of concern to English colleges offering HE, but especially so in this well-to-do West London region. With competition from world-class schools and adjacent recruiting universities, the South Thames Colleges Group operates in a fiercely red ocean market, reminiscent of the febrile 1990s, which other regions have managed to move away from.

Peter Mayhew-Smith considers such inter-tertiary competition not helpful to the needs of this particular region. Students progressing to nearby universities will tend to enter the national economy and may be lost to the region. In general, universities with their national and global outlooks tend not to be regionally-minded. Indeed, they often offer provision which may well not match local or regional employment needs. Mayhew-Smith feels, emphatically, that education should not be seen as simply preparation for work, and he strongly emphasises the importance

of transferable skills. Nevertheless, it is essential to preserve access to such tertiary skilling and reskilling for those who wish to remain and contribute to the locale of their family upbringing, and also for adults seeking to advance their careers. He is worried that college provision in general may ultimately be undermined and fractured by universities deflating entrance grades. This poses an acute threat to HND programmes at the college and to provision at levels 4 and 5. He estimates that, at present, roughly 400 college students use this route to gain high-grade employment with nearly all the students being referred to the college by employers as part of the local economy talent pipeline.

All the college leaders highlighted in this study intuitively understand, but also study their particular locale and the regional processes that underpin it. Peter recognises that the prosperity in the West London region does not ultimately come from a few large employers, but is generated by a larger numbers of very small firms. He describes a situation where individual businesses can flourish and then fade, while the level of employment remains relatively stable, both for the growing, high-tech industries and for the supporting supply chains. The South Thames Colleges Group has positioned itself to supply a steady input of skills for these local businesses.

Although the Greater London Authority (GLA) provides extensive labour market information, the college supplements this by energetic networking and also seeks out places for apprenticeships and placements. There is again a regular interchange between these businesses and college staff.

LEADING WITHIN A LOCALE

When a college has some 30,000+ students and employs up to 2,000 staff distributed over several campus sites, the affinity with local identity becomes a distinct challenge for college leaders. Historically, when FE colleges were much smaller institutions they took their name and their local branding from the town or region which had given rise to it. Occasionally, some were named after a local dignitary, but the college identity remained highly localised. In the twenty-first century, however, colleges now embrace many linked spaces. By and large, they have expanded into a larger economic space; understood as a regional eco-system. The borders of the regions they serve do not match the political boundaries of the older economic order. Some of these former frontiers and political districts have provided unhelpful, with college groups needing to deal with multiple local authorities and local enterprise bodies. In general, what is emerging across the UK is a new generation of larger colleges serving coherent economic regions, less constrained by vestigial political boundaries. This process is clearest in those metropolitan regions with devolved powers.

When Principal Paul Little joined ***City of Glasgow College*** 12 years ago there had been at least eight failed attempts at rationalisation or merger. The city clearly felt a need for some form of consolidation. Little's prior expertise and fresh perspective enabled him to craft a compelling united vision guiding the four specialist constituent colleges through a complex merger process. In successfully bringing the legacy colleges into a coherent new single institution he created what he describes as four legacy brands that are refreshed and flourish within the new composite

brand of the newly merged super college. He also created a seamless governance structure that is integrated with the civic profile of the city. For example, the former CEO of the council is on the Board of Corporation as is the CEO of the Chamber of Commerce.

Little feels that it is essential to be sensitive to culture, both from people and process perspectives. He believes this is much more important than having an emphasis on clarifying structure and systems. You can, he says, have a great organisational structure, but without staff buy-in it will not be effective nor will it optimise the potential of the merged institute. He also recommends that it is important to pay tribute to the legacy culture particularly to bring closure to staff affinity with their former institutions.

Structures, he says, are best kept simple and closely aligned to a four-quadrant balanced scorecard approach to planning. Currently every curriculum department is being transformed into industry academies, around 100 of them, coordinated through four super faculties. Simple induction for new staff has been replaced by a year-long process of integration in to the college culture, including structured leadership, management development and fortnightly staff briefings direct from the principal.

As college staff have already obtained high level skills in their original occupational area he, in common with other College leaders, feels they do not want, or need, managerialism. Indeed, it will be resisted. Instead he suggests that teams need a clear sense of purpose, a community of practice and an *esprit de corps*. The College has an executive leadership team and a senior management team. Their purpose is not to micro-manage but to coach, inspire and to lead. He wants them to be agile, promote change through dispersed leadership and enabled autonomy. He is a great believer in role-modelling, with style, not policy. Little says his early career in the Coast Guard taught him how to 'lead, follow or get out of the way'.

City of Glasgow College's provision is now very much demand led, informed by a process that involves close engagement with employers. There is an emphasis on progression into work, rather than simply qualification acquisition. Little is clear that City of Glasgow is a powerhouse for technical and professional education that fills a clear niche in Glasgow and in Scotland. The college understands its market, and hence is not in competition with adjacent universities. That being said, he would like to see the dominant higher education element (73 per cent) of his college recognised with more formal differentiation.

Belfast and Glasgow have similar cultural, industrial profiles, and the colleges' leadership of space and thinking have evolved along parallel lines. McGivern, in Belfast, believes in bringing into her institution managers who, like herself, do not have college backgrounds. Only one of her top-tier four managers is from the further education system. The first phase of regenerating **Belfast Metropolitan College** was a wholesale restructure. The second was to establish the college as an anchor institution, building on the heritage capital generated around the Titanic, restoring not just civic pride but an internal pride in the college. It is now in a strong place, with results rising year on year, and it has become part of the city dialogue. What the college has brought to Belfast has also defined its internal identity. The college vision is underpinned by a digitalised performance framework. McGivern wants a college that can change direction during the course of a term, rather than treading water until the end of the year.

McGivern also seeks an ethos of 'vim and vigor'. Having established a central value system, the college has the data to divert resources to the wider economic benefit. She believes that universities, as peer tertiary institutions, just cannot move that quickly. Thus, a rapidly growing cyber-security industry has established links with the College rather than a university for regional high-skill provision. McGivern is clear that links with employers and industry should come not through just one gatekeeper; so, in her college, it is not only the hierarchy who go out to open doors. All staff are encouraged to go into the

locality and join employer groups to establish connectivity at every level. They are aware of what is making the most economic noise at any given moment and are able to feel the pulse of their metropolitan economy. This takes the college into research and development activity, supporting the small enterprises that are driving the regeneration of Belfast.

Coleg Gwent has more of a regional than a metropolitan identity. This differs from a city college in that the various client groups often come from specific geographical spaces. The footprint of the college is different to the foregoing colleges, but the scale and the relationship with the regional economy are similar. This impact has grown in recent years as the college helps the city of Newport to develop a new regeneration strategy, shifting from seeking to reclaim lost industries towards a more careful study of how the economy is reacting to the new economic order. However, for much of its region, the college has to recognise that its students are insufficiently mobile and their parents prone to fiercely local affiliations. The college, as it heads towards being a tertiary institution, serves a number of disparate but overlapping groups, requiring a mix of duplication and specialisation, and has to understand a number of distinct geographically based sub-sets within the regional economy as a whole. Thus, the college supports five campuses, each with a degree of autonomy. The managers of these campuses form an important layer in the college leadership structure as they not only manage geographically, but also lead a particular curriculum area, thereby interweaving a localness into a unified, whole-college approach.

Grimsby Institute is also a disparate institution with locations spreading up and down the east coast and inland to Doncaster and Leeds. It prides itself on bringing together differing institutional types and, therefore, is not looking for homogeneity. Its strategic intent is as to have a 'house of brands'. However, in this study, looking at the role of Debra Gray we chose to focus on its interaction with the economy of the immediate Grimsby region, a distinct economic ecology beset by the decline, some

would say even the massacre, of its traditional fishing and food processing industries.

As with many economic hinterlands currently in the process of regeneration, supporting local start-up businesses and developing the skill sets of the indigenous population is the major contributor to reigniting the economy. Gray sees this as central to the strategic direction of Grimsby Institute. Curriculum planning starts in November. Curriculum teams share their knowledge of information they have gained from employers through regular contact, often from recent employment and through trade-based communities of practice, supported by extensive investment in labour market intelligence. The college then engages in a 'Dragon's Den' process, putting forward proposals for new provision, which are then subject to scrutiny as to viability and affordability and to what might need to be retired to release the necessary capacity. Gray is determined that this remains a bottom-up process, supported by guidance and critical challenge from her senior team. All lecturers have a role in this, working through 40 curriculum units representing different industrial sector areas.

Further down the east coast, the towns of Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth are not a natural integrated community. Despite sharing similar histories and demography, they are divided by a county boundary and both political and civic structures. Multiple demarcations like this are a good example of how traditional political and administrative structures do not help to define today's economic regions. The towns share a coast line on the outer rim of East Anglia. They have both been damaged by declining maritime and tourism industries but share a common frontier with an off-sea gas industry and a large off-shore windfarm, a nuclear plant and multiple small firms. The newly-formed **East Coast College** (2017) is leading the way in bringing a coherence to this previously fragmented economic region.

From the executive leadership perspective of Stuart Rimmer, this was an area where the competitive nature of the quasi market had clearly failed. The region was served by five colleges, three

of which have now merged to become the East Coast College. He feels that the legacy colleges did not support the region economically, being forced instead by market conditions to engage in intense marketing to preserve their fiefdoms. Stepping back and looking at the overall regional system as a whole has enabled greatly improved planning.

Rimmer's strategy has been to maintain a series of complementary brands, gently moving the college from sub-regional provision identified by footfall location to a regional profile. A sixth form college stands slightly aside from the technical provision, its manager retaining the title of principal as part of its academic aura. There is now also a Maritime College brand and an Offshore Wind Centre brand. The college has been able to develop a University of Suffolk brand which, in an area of traditionally very low (9 per cent) HE participation, has become significant. The college remains committed to developing general further education, but the process of reconstructing following the very recent merger (completed in 2018) is still a work in hand. Rimmer manages his new college through 'four pillars': 'Winning our Market', 'Improving our Business', 'Student Success, Progression and Wellbeing' and 'People'. This approach is intended to consolidate the new college, while supporting a distributed management approach.

However, among the staff in general there is not yet a shared common identity; 'some still have the former DNA'. But, as the new college expands its role in the local skills ecology, lecturers have been able to identify more closely with their trade and their community of practice. Rimmer describes these multiple communities within the college as an internal eco-system that mirrors the wider regional employment environment.

The ***South Thames Colleges Group*** also serves an area where the long-standing political and civic boundaries criss-cross the economic reality of the region. Bordering the 'western wedge',²³

23 *Introducing the Western Wedge. Sub-Regional Planning across the Greater London Boundary.* Martin Simmons. Planning in London, April–June 2004.

widely regarded as a coherent economic region experiencing rapid growth and prosperity, particularly in the digital and high-tech industries and in logistics, the four main college sites are located within four local authority boundaries. Each of the legacy colleges retains a distinct ethos. Peter Mayhew-Smith believes that given their location and history and the sheer scale of a College with 22,000 students, it is 'too big to be coherent'. His approach is to work with the 'footfall identity', a local branding that has become well established. Mayhew-Smith has developed a strategy of 'localness', as each of the three main centres serve distinctive social communities with perceptibly differing profiles. Kingston, for example, epitomises the leafy borough aura of West London. South Thames traditionally served a more inner London community, with Carshalton and Merton located in the low-rise estates spanning the Wandle Valley somewhere between. Much of the college's provision was originally around levels 2 and 3, but, as the area progressively gentrifies and as the economy prospers and skill requirements become more demanding, these centres are having to set about upskilling to higher levels of performance.

Paradoxically, by developing a footfall rather than a corporate approach, Mayhew-Smith has restored the former Merton College to a more local character than it had in its previously merged situation. His approach to distributed management has been to encourage the four centres to develop their own local leadership. The inherent culture of the group is thus one of localness first, corporate second. Mayhew-Smith sees it as important to distinguish this local-first approach from parochialism. However, he recognises that with this distributed approach a tension plays out in the management team and, to some extent, within the Board of Corporation. This strategy, however, is well-suited to a local economy that is dominated by very small firms and a student body, many of whom are transiting through their local college on to a multiplicity of university destinations. Consequently, while much of the curriculum provision is replicated across the four centres,

Kingston College has differentiated itself by growing closer to the high-achieving Western Wedge economy. As a whole, the group is tending, increasingly, to align its provision to the dynamic regional economy. Curriculum plans are now projected up to five years ahead, in a planning process that is able to draw on the impressive amount of detailed labour market information that is coming from the mayor's office.

CONJECTURES AND CONCLUSIONS

Leaders are charged with the good conduct and strategic direction of their organisation. This responsibility intensifies as the scale of the colleges increases. The colleges involved in this study have become very large indeed. Leaders are responsible for the safety of large numbers of students and staff, for thousands of learning outcomes, and for the prudent deployment of significant sums of public money. As colleges increase in scale and become more multi-faceted, as they come to occupy economically coherent regions, as they grow closer to employers, politicians and civic leaders, both strategic direction and good conduct become far more complex. Colleges can no longer be unitary in the sense that staff can interact across the institution or adhere to an ethos generated within a single community. Their management is multifaceted. At the same time, college leaders have become significant regional players and must attend to the responsibilities that this brings. This, together with the scale of activity in the newly emerging colleges, requires distributed management systems that can ensure the effective operation of the college within the parameters of a shared strategic purpose.

Vision

The leaders participating in this study do not work in localized silos, they are located within wider systems. In general, and there are exceptions, the reduction in competition and the impact of the quasi-market has enabled leaders to look with greater confidence beyond the immediate organisation. They collaborate with key figures to promote and sustain regional economic developments and civic unity. Their strong regional footfall gives such leaders some access to national policy and, indeed, to global discussions.

As colleges are progressively embedded within their regions the success of the college becomes interconnected with that of the region. These institutions bring invaluable capital to economic and civic life and are, across the UK, the main drivers for social inclusion and social mobility. Through their relationships with employers and academics they are able to anticipate and provide the skills that will be needed as the economy develops, both in highly-technical innovatory environments and for those roles that will maintain the fabric of society. They are the main player in the skill supply chain which supports employment.

These college leaders have escaped from the institutional focus that is a consequence of excessive competition. They cross boundaries,²⁴ work in partnership, form collaborations, integrate into the fundamentals of the regional eco-system. Within this complexity they need to maintain a clear line of sight, a sense of purpose as to how the resources entrusted to them can best assist the common weal. This generates a strategic direction which is a sub-set of a wider regional sense of purpose, but is also a strategic direction around which the good conduct of the college may be established.

Altruism

A regional skills system involves a complex set of relationships between schools, other further and higher education providers, and employers. These are embedded in a yet more complex regional economic system. Organisations within these systems need supply chains, which may serve many similar organisations, and which are supported by a periphery of skills and capabilities that are crucial to their operational needs. For a system to be successful, a strategic leader needs to look across the system as a whole. Short-sighted self-interest, for example, recruiting students onto inappropriate courses, can damage the wider system to the long-term detriment of the whole. The altruistic leader seeks to promote courses of action that are intended to promote

24 Grainger, P. 2017. *Crossing boundaries: A review of projects, research and think pieces commissioned and supported by FETL during 2016.* FETL.

mutual benefits for the common good. The college leaders in this study have shown that they are able to demonstrate a sense of proportion with regard to the contribution of their organisation, a sense of how they fit within the wider ecology, and the impact that that has on the well-being of the whole. The altruistic leader is one who sees how the wellbeing of the wider system is important to the well-being of their institution.

Civic profile

Some years ago, there was speculation that e-learning, a combination of web-based learning platforms and intranets, might replace traditional learning structures, particularly in the case of TVET. This has not happened. Although supported and enhanced by virtual learning environments, learning remains, essentially, a social activity and colleges retain a physical presence. The leaders in this study demonstrate a firm commitment to social inclusion, and design systems and buildings which prioritise access and promote a sense of welcome. The new college building in the Titanic Quarter of Belfast is the most noteworthy example, bringing a state-of-the-art structure into an area that was previously troubled and derelict. The leaders in this study make deliberate use of the scale and presence of their colleges to promote regeneration, to establish high-profile buildings, to reinforce local branding, and to provide a safe environment to many who might otherwise drop out of the system. They have established their colleges as a regional anchor institution, and from that base play a full role in civic decision-making.

Networks of competence

Colleges link learning to employment. They provide courses that are based on the close scrutiny of labour market information and other intelligence that they glean from employers and policy-makers. They maintain a high state of intelligence on the progress and future direction of the economic system in which they are embedded. Thus, college leaders sit on regional planning groups

and are in a unique position to have oversight of employment trends. They can assess the replacement needs of public and other civic services; can work with employers to assess future skills requirements and they frequently collaborate in order to provide appropriate learning environments. They recruit staff from among those active in the local economy and this helps establish communities of practice that can maintain a high awareness of developing skills needs and employment patterns. College leaders can inform their vision through their understanding of the character of local business, the interrelated nature of supply chains, and the professional and technical services necessary to support them. It is in this way that economic areas, metropolitan or regional, achieve their distinctive nature, a set of inter-related competencies. Colleges provide an essential service to these economic systems and networks, but also, increasingly, their leaders help determine them.

Afterword

Size, developments in policy which have not been uniform across the four nations, and integration into civic structures and economic systems, have all had an impact on the role of the college leader. No two technical colleges are the same as they have come to reflect regional variation, and their leaders develop the college ethos to integrate into the regional identity. While this study has sought to identify common themes across six influential leaders as their responsibilities change and increase in complexity each role also has unique elements. The job is demanding: responsible for the life progression of thousands of people and supporting the wealth of a region. What is clear is that the role is both unusual, in terms of reach and impact, and still not widely understood.

What has emerged from these six case studies is that these leaders are working from an in-depth understanding of their economic and civic space. Building on this they have each developed an ethical position in which they view the viability of their colleges, including their role in social inclusion, as being

closely tied to local and regional government. This is a conception of leadership that diverges from that which emerged through the quasi-market established at the time of incorporation, and during the top-down planning experienced through the period of the Learning and Skills Council.

The relationship between these college leaders and their local environment is clearly a dynamic one, taking place at a time when the governance frameworks of colleges and within localities continue to evolve. This is a significant development, which is not widely appreciated, and which could benefit from wider research.



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