

# Further Education Trust for Leadership: Connecting the Dots – Spring Symposium 2019

This paper summarises the discussion from FETL’s 2019 Spring Symposium which developed the themes of collaboration and local systems which were explored in Prof. Ewart Keep’s FETL publication [Scripting the Future](#). This summary is divided into the following sections:

- |                                      |                                      |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Collaboration & Competition in FE | 4. Moving Towards Systems            |
| 2. Place Shaping and Civic Mission   | 5. Upcoming Work and Further Reading |
| 3. Current Challenges                |                                      |

Held at City of Bristol College’s Advanced Engineering Centre on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, the symposium brought together an audience of local government officials, sector leaders, practitioners, academics and members of the wider policy community. The event was chaired by **Jonathan Shaw**, CEO of Policy Connect and an opening speech was provided by **Prof. Ewart Keep**, Director of the Centre for Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE), Oxford University. Panel contributions were made by:



- **Cllr. Mark Hawthorne**, Leader of Gloucestershire County Council, and Chair of the Local Government Association’s People and Places Panel
- **Smita Jamdar**, Partner at Shakespeare Martineau, and Skills Commissioner
- **Emma Jarman**, Vice Principal for Curriculum & Quality, City of Bristol College (pictured)

## 1. Collaboration and Competition in FE – Thoughts from Prof. Keep

**Professor Ewart Keep** opened the discussion with an overview of his analysis of the FE and skills sectors in England highlighting the fact that most countries, and regions within them, organise their provision as a ‘system’ e.g. Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Germany, France, Finland, Sweden, and New Zealand.

Education in England is predominantly market based and centrally designed, controlled and regulated. Prof. Keep commented that within FE there exists a set of quasi-market segments, each with their own funding rules and competitive systems rather than a singular ‘FE market’. These segments are highly unstable and uncertain with much of the activity dictated by individual student and employer choice.



Tiers of Education	Type	Quasi-market segments
▶ Early years	MARKET	14-16
▶ Primary	MARKET	16-18/19
▶ Secondary	MARKET	Levy-funded apprenticeship
▶ FE (except devolved AEB)	MARKETS	Non-levy apprenticeship
▶ HE	MARKET	Post-19 AEB
▶ Apprenticeship	MARKETS	Post-19 loans funded

Keep argued that policymakers are ‘mealy mouthed’ about describing the world they have created and indulge in ‘magical thinking’ in their approach to the FE sector. Firstly, there is a reluctance to fully embrace the implications of the system’s design and policymakers avoid embracing words such as the ‘customer’, ‘consumer’ and ‘bankruptcy’, with euphemisms such as ‘market exit’ being preferred for Hadlow College’s current situation. In the second instance Keep states that:

*“Policymakers indulge in magical thinking in desiring and attempting to promote markets, while then acting as nano-managers, who second guess the market and the outcomes it might generate e.g. 3 million [apprenticeships] target. Ministers have believed we can have the best of both worlds, thinking there is some mysterious way you can arrive at a set of incentives that balances elements of competition with elements of local cooperation. The nature of this balance and the design of the incentives to support it remain clouded in obscurity”*

Prof. Ewart Keep

Regulation of the market is also highly complicated with providers dealing with a number of bodies ranging from Ofsted, ESFA, the FE Commissioner, QAA, OfS and potentially the IfA. Standards and market entry requirements vary and across the system there are a number of tensions:

- ▶ National markets v. CA’s desire for systems
- ▶ National policy goals and what the market and consumer choice (students and employers) will deliver
- ▶ Social inclusion mission v. role as provider of high quality/status VET
- ▶ Co-operation v. competition at local levels
- ▶ Long-standing 3-way tension between what employers want, what students choose, and what government aspires to (and FE’s thankless task in mediating between these).

Under these conditions managing a college can be very problematic especially due to the short-term markets forces which drive delivery and the political instability which besets the provision. Within this context FETL research publications into devolution and marketisation suggest that FE senior leaders fall into two camps:

1. Those who thrive on wheeler-dealing and competition and who would hate any return to a more systems-based approach that might restrict their freedom
2. Those who hanker after a more collaborative and stable environment

While the market encourages the behavioural traits of the first group, it is important to ensure that organisational purpose is not lost and leaders reflect on what it is that they want to protect their freedom from and what is it their freedom should enable. Conversely, some FE leaders are resisting marketisation and competition with some providers choosing to collaborate in their local areas i.e. the West Midlands and the UK Innovation Corridor’s Regional Skills Concordat. However, they are doing this despite of, not because of, current national funding incentives.

In some combined authorities a joined-up policy agenda is also emerging between aspirations around inclusive growth, economic development, Business support/improvement, and innovation, and the FE and employment agendas around skills, progression in the labour market, and fair work and job quality. This type of joined-up policy making requires expertise. Yet such evidence as we have suggests that many LEPs lack capacity/expertise, and even some of the Mayoral Combined

Authorities have struggled to assemble teams that can manage their AEB, never mind wider responsibilities and the new joined up economic and social agenda

*“Unfortunately, the centralisation of our FE system over the past thirty years has stripped vast amounts of knowledge and capacity from local areas, and shifted responsibility downward to individual institutions/providers via the national PMS and its KPIs. Local capacity rebuilding will therefore be key if we want to move away from national, one-size-fits-all provision and programmes.”*

Prof. Ewart Keep

It is here that England could learn a great deal from the experiences of Wales and Scotland where a more holistic and progressive national policy context is providing a stable base for improvement and system building. The Fair Work Commission report in Wales for example and Scotland’s Labour Market Strategy, Economic Strategy, and Enterprise and Skills Strategy Board delivering a joined-up agenda.

## 2. Place Shaping and Civic Mission

Responding to Prof. Keep’s opening comments **Cllr. Mark Hawthorne** provided his perspective as Leader of Gloucestershire County Council and as chair of the LGA’s People and Places Board. Cllr. Hawthorne explained that even national problems will require local solutions designed by people closer to the realities of problems who can apply insights and make connections that department bound officials from Whitehall may not be able to see.



He cited the Council’s use of Local Growth Deal funding which created dialogue between local education providers and co-investment to expand provision and produce economies of scale while serving an area of historic educational disadvantage. For example, the fund and the collaboration it facilitated led to the establishment of a new college and sixth form in a deprived area.

However, Cllr. Hawthorne was not confident we had established quite the right structures to meet challenges around skills and employment. Within Gloucestershire there is a mismatch between provision and need and an acute demographic challenge with the county facing a significant net outflow of young people. In the medium to long term this trend presents the county with an existential threat to the growth of its economy.

*“Key for us is taking back control of levers that help shape place. As part of our Gloucestershire vision 2050 we know that Cheltenham, Tewkesbury and Cirencester will together have the same population as Bristol and we must shape these places to attract young people. What is clear is that the disconnect between skills provision and local skills need must be overcome to keep young people in the region. In order to meet the aspirations of what we’re trying to achieve as an area we need to have the powers to ‘pump-prime’ this and invest today in the skills we will need for tomorrow”*

Cllr. Mark Hawthorn, Gloucestershire County Council

The notion of ‘place shaping’, which has seemingly taken the place of devolution discussion over the past two years in Whitehall, was developed by Smita Jamdar who agreed that national prescriptions were often too blunt for meeting local needs. In the worst instances they mitigated against local success such as in Teeside, where Smita and the Skills Commission had recently heard that the onset of the apprenticeship levy had damaged a previously thriving apprenticeship network.



*“What’s right for Lancashire may not be right for Lincolnshire or certainly not for Liverpool. However, as power is devolved a real question around boundaries emerges as they then determine who does get funded and who doesn’t in ways that may be quite arbitrary for learners and SMEs alike”*

**Smita Jamdar**, Partner, Shakespeare Martineau

As well as local authorities having a role in place shaping, Smita argued that it was important that education institutions took a role in this and remembered the civic environment that they operate in. Within HE the Civic Universities Commission was encouraging universities to act with enlightened self interest and embed contributing to their local areas within their institutional strategies. Contributing to the vibrancy of a provincial town could help a university attract world-class academics, and in the case of a city such as Sheffield where the student population of 60,000 is equivalent of that formerly employed in its steel industry, embracing an institution’s commitment to place could be transformative.

Vice Principal Emma Jarman spoke of City of Bristol College’s sense of itself as a custodian based upon its historical lineage; the college has provided the city with skills since its origins when it supported the port’s merchants in the seventeenth century.

*“We recognise that the market is driving everyone to compete, but we see a shared responsibility towards the people, communities and businesses of the area”*

Emma Jarman, VP, City of Bristol College

This sense of mission drove the college to actively play a part in the life of the city and seek out collaboration with potential competitors. The college’s newly announced memorandum with the University of the West of England and Bottleneck Studios was one such example of this behaviour which other senior college leaders in the audience said was not reflective of college-university relations in their localities. As well as the college’s own sense of mission, local factors were conducive to collaboration within the region, the West of England’s devolved Adult Education Budget and mayors, the city’s status as a Learning City and a Refugee City, and the presence of national employers such as Channel 4 and the city’s traditional manufacturing base.

### 3. Current Challenges

The challenges facing providers in the current system were never far from the discussion. A dramatic fall in part-time learning of 44% over the last three years, as documented by the AoC and Centre for Progressive Policy, was highlighted by attendees. Similarly, the challenge and inefficiency of the Combined Authority administering over 100 providers each delivering less than £1000 worth of provision locally was mentioned. The management and oversight of that provider base was said to be at odds with value for money. In addition to those aspects of market failure and inefficiency Paul Shakespeare from the High Value Manufacturing Catapult spoke of a parallel innovations system failure.

*“As most of demands are unknown until they arrive our skills system needs to be better attuned to the outputs of our innovation centres. While some of this may happen locally on a business to institution basis this needs to be systematic and developed at a level where specialisms can be delivered on a national basis and supported locally by feed-in networks. Our system is currently missing this layer”*

Paul Shakespeare, High Value Manufacturing Catapult



This notion of missing tiers in the system was developed by **Cath Gladding** from AELP who suggested that in the absence of government providing a coordinating role, sector organisations were having to act more as market mediators. The structure of the current system also had significant implications for staff in the sector who were having to take on multiple professionalisms: the teacher trainer, the networker, the digital native and the leader with a civic mindset.

The growing expectations on the workforce was also underlined by the unfortunate reality of their pay and the challenges that the college faced in recruiting teachers to deliver training for apprentices who may well be being significantly more than their trainers if working for a company such as Airbus. Where colleges cannot pay the market for training delivery, skills provision, employment and local economic growth suffer.

While Ann Solomon, Barnfield College, made the point that investment was needed and value for money should not always be seen in the short term, greater flexibility around budgets could assist college leaders too. On top of the spending reductions in the sector, the challenge of managing a college is made harder by the implications of managing short term annual budgets with little flexibility around how pots of money can be spent.

## 4. Moving Towards Systems

It was pointed out by Norman Crowther, National Education Union, that the examples of collaboration in Bristol had occurred in spite of the system rather than because of it, and audience members spoke of the need to mediate the market and embed collaboration systematically rather than leave it as an activity that providers take at their own risk.

When discussing how to move towards a more collaborative system Cllr. Hawthorne reiterated the view that there is a gap in our current system and even within devolved AEB areas coverage is patchy. He went on to say that:

“While devolution is part of the answer conversations need to begin at local level. The authorities and partners within Greater Manchester were working together long before George Osborne granted them powers through the Northern Power House. That shared agenda and process began 30 years before the Mayoralty. These conversations need to begin to provide the basis of this missing layer and the Treasury need to relax the restrictions on devolving funding only to authorities with directly elected mayors and open them up to all combined authorities”

Cllr Mark Hawthorn, Gloucestershire County Council

Prof. Keep agreed that devolution had thus far been patchy. He felt that the key milestones towards creating a system needed to start with the creation of shared local visions but crucially required a fundamental change in the culture in government and the civil service.

“Every single bill over the last 30 years has expanded the minister’s power and ability to meddle with the system. Ministers need to learn the enormous costs and pain of being responsible for everything. In order for employers to meaningfully engage with the system as co-producers as opposed to hands off customers the right social partnerships and devolved structures need to be there. Regional/local and sectoral spaces, as opposed to central, could unleash a great deal of creativity and collaboration, but this is where it comes back to building capacity as this won’t appear from thin air”

Prof. Ewart Keep

In moving towards a more devolved system there may be recurring challenges and policymakers should, as always, be wary of unintended consequences. Ian Pryce, Chief Executive of the Bedford

College Group, provided some examples of challenges FE could face. Providers operating on borders and at the peripheries of authorities could struggle to benefit from resources which local partnerships might choose to focus in the centre of their geographies.

“While there is an attractiveness of systems over markets, the reality is that many colleges, following the Area Based Reviews, now operate across multiple local authorities – over ten in the case of Bedford College Group. The challenge with collaboration in these cases is that it just takes one partner to not engage and any plans to collectively enhance provision are stalled. I can think of a greater number of examples in the sector where innovation has happened because the provider just assessed the market need and got on with it. Some of these developments would not have gone on, so policymakers should consider how to maintain some of the current systems responsiveness”

**Ian Pryce**, Chief Executive, Bedford College Group



## 5. Upcoming Work and Further Reading



Concluding the Symposium Heather Cross, Governance Manager at FETL, reminded attendees of the upcoming projects FETL is sponsoring in this area: the joint Policy Connect / Learning & Work Institute – Skills Commission inquiry into the FE system, and the AoC’s Colleges of the Future inquiry. Further details about these projects and FETL’s 40 publications can be found on the FETL website along with blogs, videos and information on the FETL network.

<https://fetl.org.uk/>

### Related FETL Publications:

- [Scripting the Future: exploring potential strategic leadership responses to the marketization of English FE and vocational provision](#)
- [Employers in the driving seat? New thinking for FE leadership](#)
- [Adopting global skills innovation for the UK](#)
- [Equipping Scotland for the future](#)
- [The future is coming: ready or not? Delivering a successful 21st century skills System for Northern Ireland and Scotland](#)
- [The Skills System in Northern Ireland](#)
- [The Changing Face of FE Leadership in Wales](#)