FURTHER EDUCATION
TRUST FOR LEADERSHIP

LEADING BY LISTENING:
REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Executive Summary

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OCCASIONAL PAPERS

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LEADING BY LISTENING

This project was commissioned to assess the mood and wellbeing of the FE sector in England in 2019, using the 'Listening Post' methodology developed by the educational charity OPUS*.

Listening Post is a form of social enquiry, not unlike a focus group, that is used to take a 'snapshot' of society, or a section of society, at a particular time. It proceeds on the basis that the themes and patterns emerging from discussions by a small group will unconsciously express some of the characteristics of the wider system to which that group belongs.

Between June and November 2019, 33 Listening Posts were conducted in the FE sector:

10 + The view above

7 groups of college leadership teams
3 AoC Regional groups of CEOs, Principals, Deputy Principals and Assistant Principals

12 + The view in-between

6 groups of support staff
6 groups of teaching staff

11 The view below

11 groups of students

33

*OPUS – An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society Regd. Charity No. 282415 (see p.26)

HOW IT WORKS

- A Listening Post is a 60-minute group discussion, with minimal facilitation[*].

- Participants contribute anonymously as representatives of the FE sector, sharing experiences of their current roles within FE (what it feels like to be me, here, now).

- An anonymised transcript of the discussion is sent to participants to check for accuracy and anonymity[†].

- All transcripts are analysed for connecting themes and patterns that speak for the whole sector.

[*]In cases where a group fell silent for an extended period, participants were asked a question, usually about the measures they took to look after their own or others' wellbeing. Some student groups required more concerted facilitation, involving questions about how college differed from school and what they had learnt about their own ways of learning or coping with pressure. Three discussions were reduced to 45 minutes due to time constraints affecting participants. In larger groups, except those involving students, participants were divided into two groups who took turns to discuss their preoccupations for 30 minutes each while the other group sat behind them and listened. Those in a listening role were invited to write down any personal associations they had to the issues being discussed. The associative data was also retained and used.

[†]Transcripts were not circulated to student groups owing to concerns about the propriety, from a data protection and safeguarding standpoint, of requesting their contact details.

SEVEN THEMES

Engagement with purpose

> **1. Priorities** – the primary ends set for or by the sector and people within it, as reflected in the choices made by or for them.

> **2. Compliance** – the means by which the sector and people within it seek to achieve the goals set by or for them.

Engagement with practicality

> **3. Capacity** – the extent to which the sector and people within it have a realistic grasp of what they and each other can and can't do.

> **4. Effectiveness** – the extent to which the sector and people within it manage to accomplish those things of which they are capable.

Engagement with people

> **5. Presentation** – the ostensible characteristics of an individual or group (the inside seen from the outside: how the group regards the individual).

> **6. Community** – the extent to which people take responsibility for each other (the outside world seen from the inside: how the individual regards the group).

Each of these themes contributes (positively or negatively) to:

> **7. Wellbeing** – both of the sector and people within it.

Each theme is explored in a separate paper. This paper summarises the findings of all seven themes. Full transcripts of the 33 Listening Posts are available at **www.fetl.org.uk.**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Listen to us. We don't get listened to."

1. PRIORITIES

"You can be 100% efficient and totally ineffective. That's where the balance has shifted: the drive for efficiency has overtaken the effectiveness."

Key words: funding, strategy, recruitment, change, hindrance, inconsistency, boundaries, uncertainty, apathy, disengagement, immaturity

Colleges help students to develop clearer priorities for themselves and to align their actions accordingly. However, the sector is not permitted to choose its own priorities and its actions are prescribed and monitored.

- By linking funding to performance, a college that fails to achieve instant results with students who arrive disengaged and failed by the school system is then subject to a loss of funds. This reinforces the sector's reputation for poor deployment of resources and weakens its ability to cater for changing demographics, local employer demands and differing student needs.

- The relative dearth of academic research and advocacy from the sector has led to FE policy being driven by considerations and criteria more favourable to schools and universities. In particular, the focus on financial inputs and performance outputs ignores the non-linearity of progress made by many non-traditional learners.

- The challenge of succeeding in a few months with English and Maths GCSE where schools have failed over many years sets colleges a task that is not only Herculean but also distorts their identity and purpose as centres of vocational and technical training. The requirements of GCSE curriculums make them less readily adaptable to the capabilities of non-traditional learners.

- The high proportion of college funding allocated to staff costs make it inevitable that, in lean times, headcount will be squeezed and individual performances carefully monitored. This increases the burden and reduces the reward for staff, while also making it harder to attract new recruits.

- The challenges of preparing young people for work, coupled with technological and other changes in the work for which they are being prepared, has exposed colleges to an unrelenting merry-go-round of change in policy, assessment, curriculum and process requirements. This makes it hard for staff to embrace each new initiative as many are replaced before they have been given enough time to work.

- The roles of support staff are increasingly being stretched across a range of duties so that colleges can have maximum flexibility to achieve the most with the fewest people. They have little option but to accept these unwanted additional responsibilities, while their effectiveness is then hampered by bureaucracy and short-term decision-making.

- Aside from the demands they face outside the classroom, the challenges of teaching are also becoming more complex as the needs of students become ever more diverse, more courses are accepting enrolments from students of questionable aptitude and more courses are becoming unsuitable for the industries and employers at which they are aimed.

- As more students attend college reluctantly, because they are prevented from leaving education without Maths and English GCSE, so they present greater challenges to teachers in terms of attendance, behaviour, attention and engagement.

2. COMPLIANCE

"We could do better for our localities and economies and young people if we were allowed to get on with it."

Key words: interference, consequences, regulation, accountability, motivation, distortion, indiscipline, control, copying

Rules are bent and flexibility shown so that students have the best chance of passing their courses and progressing into employment. Meanwhile, colleges and staff face exacting assessment against measures which do not fully reflect their efforts or achievements.

- College leaders feel hamstrung by the performance evaluation measures to which their colleges are subject, which divert management priorities towards compliance rather than the broader interests of students.

- Whitehall interference is seen as expressing a lack of trust in the sector and as an attempt to dictate management and teaching processes without sufficient expertise or appreciation of the consequences. The sector sees itself as having contributed to this lack of trust through the conduct of a few 'errant' colleges.

- There is a desire among college leaders and staff to summon the courage to resist Government interference, accompanied by a fear of the consequences if they did so. They regard themselves as having been too willing in the past to comply with its damaging or unrealistic demands.

- The pressure on performance encourages staff to set their own boundaries either by going off sick or by declining to respond to requests for help from colleagues. As well as increasing the burden on others, this also leads to a breakdown in trust between staff members and contributes to a less positive working culture.

- Students are learning to 'game' the system by enrolling on courses so that a parent can retain tax credits while they live at home, or to secure an exemption from council tax, gain a free bus pass or acquire free (eg hairdressing)

equipment. Colleges can be slow to notify the authorities when students fail to maintain their attendance.

- The pressure to secure funding from multiple pots has created a perverse incentive for colleges to create additional courses and places for students and then gamble on 'finding a way' to get them to pass.

- By appraising teachers on the basis of their students' attendance, punctuality and retention as well as their achievement, management creates a disincentive for uncommitted students to be withdrawn from their courses. The appraisal data includes their students' performance in English and Maths GCSE classes over which the teachers have little control.

- Students are sometimes enrolled on courses promising – on paper, at least – a pathway to employment, only to find that the course has been hollowed out to attract less able students or reduce teacher contact time, or equips them with skills and practices that are no longer relevant to employment.

- An increasing proportion of students attending courses are perceived as disengaged from studying, and as bringing with them onto campus the baggage of their turbulent or dysfunctional personal lives. This can make them unwilling to accept responsibility for their own conduct or for its impact on other students.

- Pressure to retain students or lose funding means that some colleges are being more tolerant of indiscipline than they should be; while the number of students enrolling only because they cannot leave education without passing GCSE Maths and English means that more are enrolling with significant domestic, personal or educational challenges.

- Some students are submitting work which is not their own, having bought it from an essay factory, borrowed it from someone at another college or copied it from the internet. Teachers under pressure to improve their record of student achievement are tempted to turn a blind eye.

3. CAPACITY

"I am dealing with situations and pressures that are probably higher now than they have ever been."

Key words: overload, demands, culture, overtime, pressure, going blank

Colleges help students not to become overwhelmed as a result of learning and assessment by simplifying, spacing and sequencing the processes. Meanwhile, leaders and staff are overwhelmed by a requirement to juggle a variety of tasks simultaneously under extreme time and resource constraints.

- Colleges have to navigate an increasingly complex funding and policy landscape, which dominates management attention and forces decisions upon them with detrimental implications for teachers and support staff.

- Leaders whose decisions impose significant extra demands on staff either turn a blind eye to the impact in order to insulate themselves from responsibility or suffer a sense of failure and guilt which is not absolved however hard and long they toil themselves.

- Leaders unintentionally contribute to an unhealthy working culture by working from home at weekends and evenings. This seems to normalise the assumption that teachers will also be working out of hours, planning lessons and marking coursework.

- Support staff face a sharp increase in demand for support from students, exacerbated by an increasing reliance on them by external services such as GPs, the police and social services.

- Funding cuts have led to reductions in staff numbers and imposed a significant additional burden on the staff who remain. In addition, teachers now have increased responsibilities to provide performance data on attendance, punctuality, retention and performance, which leaves no (paid) time for lesson planning, marking or providing additional student support.

- Teaching staff find their admin time is allocated to 15-minute intervals between lessons rather than useful periods; while their lunchtimes and rest breaks are filled up with meetings and other ad hoc requests. In aggregate, these additional demands seem unreasonable but it is hard for them to draw a line and decline individual requests.
- Students whose academic performance deteriorates under the pressure of exam conditions often make explicit choices in favour of assessment-based courses offered by colleges. Like teachers, they become overwhelmed by too many simultaneous demands, including their own internal desire to please.
- Students prefer the drip-feed of coursework assessment throughout the year to the concentrated pressures of exams. They believe that it more closely matches the pressures they will face at work and better enables them to make progress at their own pace and in their own way.
- Exams are experienced as episodes akin to panic attacks, where students freeze under pressure and temporarily lose their abilities to recall and martial information. Many students do not recognise their exam results as reflective of their learning or ability.

4. EFFECTIVENESS

"Forget about results, performance tables. The result for me is that they are employed."

Key words: learning, resilience, consistency, good, mistakes, achievement, recognition, ambition, reset, chances, maturity

Colleges help students figure out what study method works for them, however inefficient it might be, so that they can deploy their talents to their best advantage. Staff likewise develop their own means of coping with the demands of work and adapting their approaches to the needs of students. Meanwhile, leaders have to be imaginative and flexible by working with the grain of the regulatory and funding regime in which they operate.

- Colleges making imaginative use of scant resources are tempted to take risks and then swiftly change course if it turns out badly. Greater stability may come from striving to be consistently good rather than intermittently excellent. FE does not compete on level funding terms with HE and will always suffer by comparison with it.

- Many students carry over a deep-rooted sense of rejection and failure from school; for colleges to help turn them around requires students to face up to their difficulties and the challenge of trying to surmount them. The longer they resist doing so, the less time they have left at college to begin their recovery.

- The starting point for teachers, as it is for management and students, is to work out how to how to play the hand they have been dealt. When working with non-traditional learners, this may involve departing from theory in order to discover what works in practice. This is a process that can be every bit as frustrating for teachers as it is for students until, together, they make a breakthrough.

- The main satisfaction for many teachers is in observing at first hand the distance travelled by students, with their help, in reaching beyond the constraints that have limited their progress to date. All measurement of

progress is meaningless unless it is understood in the context of those constraints.

- Teachers help students find new ways of working that enable them to absorb information and skills, often through trial and error. This process requires them to overcome a fear of failure induced by their school experience and develop their own benchmarks of success.

- Students often benefit from carefully structured courses in which topics are broken down, sequenced and repeated, providing both space and time for learning to be embedded rather than tackling multiple tasks at once.

- It may take students a while to recover from previous setbacks and find their motivation for learning. Helping them to reach this position may appear inefficient and unstructured when measured against crude performance criteria, yet the art of teaching is to do just this.

- For many students, education is as much a maturity test as it is an intelligence test. College presents students with adult role models they can relate to, which allows them to form a realistic and appealing idea of themselves as adults and, from that, appreciate the educational progress this would entail for them.

5. PRESENTATION

"Most government ministers, most people in the civil service don't understand what colleges are still less have ever been there."

Key words: misunderstood, blame, pretence, communication, support, needs, life skills

Colleges offer students a chance to correct perceptions formed at school and develop a more worthwhile image of themselves. Meanwhile, the sector is unable to shrug off preconceptions and reform its own reputation in the eyes of policy makers.

- Colleges feel misunderstood by politicians and policy makers, whose opinions and priorities are often shaped by their own successful academic experiences at school and university. The language of excellence and high-performance does not fully recognise the successes of FE in levelling-up achievement among the academically unsuccessful.

- The FE sector perceives itself to be disparaged by the educational establishment as inadequate and inferior, with every management mistake and imperfection gleefully seized upon as cementing that reputation. This reinforces a culture of rejection and unfairness which makes it more difficult to inspire and energise staff.

- Attempts by college leaders to put a brave or optimistic face on their own challenges – especially the lack of resources – are often viewed as synthetic and insincere by staff, and as denying the reality of the burdens they impose on staff to achieve more with less.

- College leaders are retreating behind email to cascade awkward messages to staff remotely and, by doing so outside of the standard working day, are modelling an always-on organisational culture that denies staff adequate time for rest and recuperation.

- As well as facing greater demands on their time from management, staff also face greater demands on their time from students, who seem more-than-usually-lacking in the basic living and social skills needed to become independent, employable adults.

- Staff must strike a delicate balance between rushing to students' aid (and thereby perpetuating their sense of helplessness, dependency and entitlement) and encouraging them to fend for themselves (and thereby slowly fostering self-belief, a can-do attitude and willingness to risk failure).

- Teachers are having to take on a quasi-parental role towards students to equip them with the invisible skills, as well as the technical skills, they need to become ready for work or further study. For this essential work there is no recognition, payment or room in the timetable.

- The requirement for students under 18 to pass Maths and English GCSE before leaving education has not only changed the role of FE colleges but also lowered the baseline competence of their student intake. Many students who enrol lack basic literacy, numeracy and social skills, for which they tend to place a greater reliance on staff than on their own internal resources.

- With better understanding of the psychological and neurological challenges facing students has come a greater willingness to medicalise and label these specific conditions. This has led to an increasing tendency to regard even moderate challenges as needs meriting special dispensation rather than special effort.

- As students increasingly communicate with each other via their phones, so they are failing to develop their social skills and manners. This makes them less equipped to communicate their needs to teachers and staff and to navigate the social aspects of employment.

6. COMMUNITY

"It's the stuff you can't measure and which doesn't get measured."

Key words: goodwill, teamwork, collaboration, impact, investment, caring, effort, safety, personalised, listening

Colleges aim to provide students with an environment in which they feel safe and welcome to be themselves and, with investment of time, attention and support, to help them progress. Colleges are less good at providing these conditions for their own staff.

- The requirement for colleges to be run like businesses compromises their ability to operate like families. Businesses privilege competition over collaboration and activities delivering measurable rather than unmeasurable sources of value. Families tend to prioritise wellbeing over well-doing.

- The college business model forces the interests of financial performance to take precedence over those of staff and students. It also reduces the ability of colleges to work together in their collective interests.

- Demand from students has increased the pressure on support staff and reduced their availability to help each other out while making it ever more important that they do so when others are struggling.

- Funding restrictions make support staff positions vulnerable to changes in student numbers. This creates insecurity and anxiety and discourages staff from taking risks or innovating in their roles.

- Contact time in the classroom is the most rewarding part of teachers' jobs yet the time to prepare for lessons and help students make progress seems to be accorded a lower priority by management than their administration and other non-teaching duties, forcing teachers into a choice to sacrifice their free time or be less well prepared in class.

- The ability of teachers to give students personal attention and assistance is the key to their success in engaging students. Many teachers are choosing to invest

their own personal time and resources in ensuring that student needs are not compromised.

- The value of college as a family is most acute for the students whose own family lives are unstable and unhappy. For all students, college provides a sense of community and welcome where they can safely fit in and build their confidence, maturity and social skills.

- The focus of colleges is increasingly on meeting the basic physiological, safety and social needs of students because, until these are met, they will not be ready to face the challenge of learning.

7. WELLBEING

"We are just like the students really – we are just not switching off anymore."

Key words: switching off, compartmentalising, pretence, personalised, headspace, limits, self-knowledge, coping strategies, self-soothing, load-sharing, acknowledgement

The wellbeing of a sector or organisation requires some alignment between individual and collective approaches to priorities, compliance, capacity, effectiveness, presentation and community. Any volatility in external conditions can cause individuals and groups to take actions which are damaging to each other's wellbeing even if protective of their own, and vice versa.

- Wellbeing requires there to be alignment between individual and organisational purpose, usually involving adherence to a common set of values. The stalemate or discord produced by an incompatibility can be a cause of significant anxiety, bringing individuals into conflict with the organisational authority or their own sense of self. This can only be resolved by confronting and in some way resolving what is felt to be irreconcilable between the two.

- Organisations and individuals show their values in the priorities they accord to different interests. Wellbeing also requires effective management of competing priorities, including the maintenance of an effective work-life balance. This means putting 'firebreaks' in place to provide a means of escape from the demands of work and from potentially damaging temptations and requests.

- Wellbeing involves finding a way to derive reward from working, perhaps from the satisfaction of completing a task, mastering a skill or helping another. Without this, work can become drudgery. Wellbeing can be impaired by having to wear a mask of compliance which involves behaving in ways which are inauthentic or contrary to personal values.

- Wellbeing is individual, so it is counter-productive to prescribe 'solutions' or expect everyone to cope in the same way. Initiatives that focus on the milder end of the wellbeing spectrum risk trivialising those with more serious problems.

They also do little to address their underlying causes such as lack of autonomy, excessive workload, dysfunctional working relationships, conflicting values and unclear purposes.

- A good measure of personal wellbeing is having the capacity to attend to the wellbeing of others as well as one's own. Where it is one's job to attend to the wellbeing of others, the risk of failing to attend to one's own needs is more acute.

- Wellbeing also involves recognising (and not exceeding) one's own limits. This also means deciding what is a 'good enough' level of effort or achievement, rather than leaving judgements about the value of one's work entirely in the hands of others.

- Wellbeing involves getting to know oneself in order to play to one's own strengths rather than weaknesses. This does not mean avoiding mistakes but trying to learn from them: finding a reliable method of working may come naturally to some but involve much trial and error for others.

- It is ultimately down to individuals to find their own method of coping. Adopting a positive outlook may be popular and effective for some, while others need to confront the worst that could happen. Care must be taken with each choice to ensure it doesn't impinge upon the coping strategies of others.

- As well as allowing other people space to cope in their own way, wellbeing comes from learning to contain and manage personal anxiety and stress rather than looking to others for support, and from checking that one's own anxiety about others doesn't inadvertently increase the burden on them.

- Wellbeing is easier to maintain if there is mutuality in working relationships: this means not only giving and receiving due recognition and reward for each other's efforts but also showing understanding of the wider context in which those efforts need to be understood. Sometimes all we need is to know that someone else understands what we are going through.

- There is a cultural aspect of wellbeing that requires people to know that their emotional and mental health will be put ahead of intangible interests such as reputation, budgets, timetables and plans. The idea of community involves reciprocal provision of support and understanding for everyone by everyone, with no one left thinking that they have to cope alone.

WELLBEING: RELIABILITY OVER EXCELLENCE

Priorities

Leaders' pursuit of their colleges' purpose is compromised by both funding constraints and by the performance measures imposed by Whitehall. Teaching and support staff find themselves similarly hampered by resource constraints and performance measures imposed on them, creating a constant conflict of priorities between what is required from above and from below. Finally, students face a parallel conflict between their own short-term impulses and longer-term interests. There is a common struggle to shield home and work lives from impacting on each other as individuals become overwhelmed by the demands from above and below, causing them stress, anxiety and unhappiness.

Compliance

For many college staff, there is a stark contrast between the wellbeing measures they deploy to meet the needs of students and those offered by colleges to attend to their own wellbeing, which fail to acknowledge not just the workload but the psychological burden of their roles. In turn, they display little concern for the wellbeing of college leaders, whose role carries a similar burden.

Capacity

It is clear that the sector is stretched to capacity and that this is affecting the wellbeing of many people: leaders and teachers routinely working at weekends and evenings, and facing constant pressure to prioritise emergent issues over longer term planning and sequencing. Meanwhile support staff face an explosion of need among young people and the loss of support from external support services. Finally, students are more easily overwhelmed not just by the pressure of exam situations but also by the challenges of taking up their place in the world as self-reliant, socialised adults.

Effectiveness

Accompanying the variety of methods chosen to mitigate the pressures of work is an implicit (but unacknowledged) recognition within the sector that workload is a constant threat to their personal wellbeing – something that needs to be escaped from rather than enjoyed as a source of fulfilment and reward. Some means of escape, such as alcohol and chocolate, risk exchanging one problem for another. Alongside those who have put in effective firebreaks between their work pressures and home lives, there are many others who have not and who are suffering as a consequence.

Presentation

The sector is a 'squeezed middle' when it comes to wellbeing: part of its role is to carry the emotional burden for those in their charge whose wellbeing is at risk but this is achieved at some cost to their own wellbeing. The personal cost to leaders and staff is treated as if trivial or non-existent by those in authority over them; and this is mirrored in the way they then present themselves in role in order to maintain the confidence of those who depend on them.

Community

Wellbeing is best approached as a communal endeavour even though there is a current trend towards individualising responsibility. Colleges are experiencing increased volatility – from above, below and in-between – which has led to some understating and others overstating their own wellbeing (among leaders, support staff, teachers and students). This has made it much harder for leaders and staff to direct resources appropriately so that the turbulence can be stabilised.

Turbulence in the sector

The degree of volatility in the FE system makes any snapshot measurement of performance within it unreliable. This volatility arrives from many quarters, most notably in the emotional turbulence of adolescent students: the dysfunction and instability of their home lives and their disaffection with learning carried over from school.

Meanwhile, teaching and support staff are pared to the bone in numerical terms, leaving those who remain with less time to ensure reliability in their teaching, marking or (physical or mental) availability to students. There is also constant flux in the nature and numbers of courses offered, the course content and the choice of Awarding bodies. For leadership teams, the demographics of student numbers rise and fall alongside funding levels. Even the Ofsted inspection framework itself is changing. These are not stable conditions for measurement.

There is evidence of volatility in the struggle faced by college leaders to 'keep finance at the bottom' as a priority; the need to minimise costs forces colleges to cut essential teaching resources and make other choices which are detrimental to their overall purpose of getting school leavers ready for work.

Further volatility is introduced into the student population by colleges seeking to increase funding by maximising the numbers of students enrolled onto courses, even where they do not have room for them or the course is unsuitable.

Similarly, the Maths and English condition of funding radically alters students' reasons for enrolling at college, and also frustrates their progress in becoming equipped and qualified for employment. This results in an increasing number of students being taught on level 1 and 2 courses, requiring SEND or EHC support and in a greater incidence of problems with retention, attendance, behaviour and achievement.

Finally, volatility is introduced into the sector by the performance culture being pursued. The scenes greeting an Ofsted inspector may not represent college life the day before or after her visit. The efficacy of teaching by one teacher in one lesson on one course will be no indicator of the standard of teaching at a college overall, or even of that teacher on that course. The colleges themselves are not directly comparable, either with each other or with universities or sixth forms, because of disparities in levels of funding, in levels of local community deprivation and in the quality of student intakes.

Turbulence distorting assessment

On a league table or a spreadsheet, the comparison of one number or percentage with another may often seem reasonable at first glance but will be less so on closer inspection. Students who are present may be recorded as absent on the register; those who are present may have disrupted the learning for others; and others present may have had lessons disrupted by staff sickness absences or classroom unavailability.

Fundamentally, the efficacy of teaching itself is impossible to measure by observable criteria. A student's epiphany may not occur until after a lesson is over, or it may occur despite the fact that a teacher omits to follow steps an Ofsted inspector is told to look for. Nor do exams permit a reliable comparison to be made between students who do not cope well with pressure. It may also be that their performance is affected by the pressure their teacher is under or the funding pressure their college is under. There is no way of recognising these pressures as contributory factors.

Students making great strides in Maths or English may nonetheless still fail to reach Grade 4 GCSE; they may be taught in a class-size of 38 or a class of 7; they may be learning what they need to get a job or find that they have acquired a redundant skill; they may get a distinction in their coursework but not have written it themselves; or they may not show up at all, either because they enrolled to preserve their mum's tax credits or because they are in the toilets cutting themselves. What is the assessment model that can aspire to measure all this?

The pursuit of reliability

If measurement is a prerequisite for the sector, it might be more meaningful for colleges, leaders, support staff, teachers and students to be assessed for their reliability in delivering good enough outcomes instead of measuring individual performances or the methods used to achieve them. Reliability is arguably what employers need more than excellence. Moving to this approach would allow the FE sector to escape from the shadow of unfair comparison, both internally and externally, that currently inhibits it.

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An Organisation for Promoting
Understanding of Society

OPUS - An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society is an educational charity (no. 282415) founded in 1975 to promote understanding of society. It encourages reflective citizenship as a way for people to take more personal and collective responsibility for the common good – through active involvement in society and its institutions, rather than self-interested behaviour.

OPUS provides a combination of education, training, academic research, publication, public events and organisational consultancy. Its Listening Post methodology is now in regular use in over 30 countries around the world.

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