LEADING BY LISTENING:
REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Paper 1: Priorities

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OCCASIONAL PAPERS

FETL Occasional Papers are short, authoritative treatments of issues key to the leadership of thinking in further education and skills. Written by expert commentators, they are intended to inform and encourage new thinking about important topics.

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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.23)

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 explores **theme one**: **Priorities**. Excerpts from the transcripts are reproduced to show how each theme unfolds from above (for leaders), from in-between (for support staff and teachers) and from below (for students). Full transcripts are available at **www.fetl.org.uk.**

VISCERAL IMAGES

As well as noting the dominant themes arising in discussion among Listening Post groups, this report also explores evidence of subliminal concerns expressed by participants through their usage of idiom.

Idiomatic expressions convey imprecise meaning often not deducible from the literal sense of the words used. They are used subconsciously to add an emotional emphasis to speech by means of figurative language or analogy. Collectively, they represent the affective content of the discussion: a visceral image of the group's underlying preoccupations.

All idiomatic words and phrases have been extracted from the transcript of each Listening Post and put together to create 33 narrative descriptions each of which connects with the first and last topics discussed by the group. This process inevitably involves some editorial licence and represents a conjectural approach to the group's underlying preoccupations.

The visceral images produced provide a useful counterpoint to the content of the discussions from which they were drawn, with much overlap in subject-matter. They are organised to fit the themes identified.

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.

PRIORITIES ABOVE #1

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.

Key words above: funding, strategy, recruitment, change

Leaders:

"It can't be everybody who isn't managing their money well enough."

"In the mind of the Treasury, there is a quality issue in our sector – we are spending money in the wrong direction."

"We've seen a lot of colleges that fail not through poor leadership but through just gross underfunding."

"You are helpless because [funding] is controlled by the men in Government who see colleges as businesses."

"We are being forced to behave in a certain way but the market dynamics are being interfered with by the funders and the regulators."

"We are putting too much emphasis on the funding criteria and not enough on the academic criteria."

"We are chasing targets. There is a wind blowing and, where it goes, we have to go there. We don't have identity any more."

"The education system in FE goes around in circles. A new person in government comes up with a brilliant idea that we know they introduced 10 years ago but didn't follow through on it, so it didn't work."

PRIORITIES ABOVE #2

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.

Leaders:

"We need to become policy setters, to be much more ahead of the game, to have an element of a voice in shaping what those future changes will be."

"It's becoming too data driven."

"Our efficiency gains have come at the expense of things you can't see."

"That is why retention is such a big deal. If you lose funding this year, it is lost in future years too."

"Part of the problem FE faces is that we get no national curriculum given to us."

"They rewrite qualifications for its own sake rather than actually going back to basics."

"How close you are to potential catastrophe affects your strategic approach, makes you more risk-averse than you would naturally want to be; you miss some opportunities as a result of being fearful of getting that wrong and exposing the organisation."

PRIORITIES ABOVE #3

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.

Leaders:

"Are we an educator or are we just a staging place for where they need to be?"

"We're the last stage before they go out to work and we get the worst of it. Their problems are never addressed because there is never any money or support network and we see the knock-on effect that makes our job so hard."

"Schools change their delivery model but GCSEs stay the same in their core. FE has to run a little bit quicker, depending on the job market, the birth rate, the local area and other things affecting young people – gang violence, safeguarding, knife crime – and make sure they are work ready."

"The conditional funding for English and Maths has been the one single biggest challenge in my whole career, the biggest ask for the sector. We could spend all of our lives trying to fix English and Maths and not do anything else. It's a problem that probably wouldn't be fixed."

"Fifty percent of our students are coming here without a level 4 in English or Maths when they have had 11 years to get there and we're being told 'we're not going to pay you unless you get them there in less than a year'."

"It is time for the government to revise that decision and change the [GCSE] qualification for something that is more relevant for work."

PRIORITIES ABOVE #4

Visceral Image #1

This image depicts the need for teachers not to become stale, repetitive or defeatist in their methods but to keep trying new approaches as they search for the spark that will engage the learners in front of them.

Leaders*:

Starting topic: change making work more interesting.

Ending topic: change making college better.

Groundhog Day is where our *hands are tied* and students are *headaches* to *lose sleep* over: these *kids get out of bed* to sit in a *one size fits all holding bay*, *stripped back to the bones*, and have [Maths or English] *drummed into* them to *tick a box* to *fit in the square box*. They become *stagnant*, fall one *step behind* on the *journey* and get *lost*.

At college we *put on a game face* and seek *free rein* to add *bells and whistles* so they *buy into* our *infectious* charms. For every *Cinderella* with a *chip on their shoulder*, we create a *bubble* as a *safe space* to *peel layers back* and *cascade* our *magic dust*. We *keep an eye out* for *stray curveballs* and don't get *hung up* about *burn out*; we give it our *best shot* and *dig deep* with *heart and soul*.

We don't get *on edge* if we *dry up*, *fall over* and *draw fresh blood*. We *start from the bottom-up* and *bounce back* with a *fresh eye*. We have *knockbacks* but never *lose sight* of their *growth*. Once they start to *fly*, there is no *ceiling*.

*Leaders Group 9

PRIORITIES ABOVE #5

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.

Leaders:

"You can only cut so far and then it starts to impact on the learning."

"One of graphs I plot is staff costs as a percentage of income and one of the lines I draw is 63% or 65% – whichever the FE commissioners choose – and very few are less than 63% and I think we are never going to attract people to come because it is so hampered by funding."

"We can't bring people from industry in because they're saying 'why would I want to do that on the amount of money you're going to give me?'."

"I would like to address staff work-life balance but I can't afford to pay them any more money."

"If you get somebody who comes into FE from the private sector, they are like 'oh my god! This is unbelievable'."

"Students are the easiest part. College is the problem. The management system makes more work for us than it helps."

"If you do the right thing, keep the faith, value people and try to understand their workloads, you can keep finance at the bottom as an outcome and not let it rise up as a driver."

PRIORITIES ABOVE #6

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.

Leaders:

"We never have time to stop, reflect and think longer term."

"We've had so many different people running the place; it's like football, there's no continuity; they get this person in, pay them lots of money, then get rid of them because they didn't win anything and get another one in. They've all got different ideas, different systems, different ways of doing things so nothing's ever really established."

"There's no strategy where we're going 'in five years' time, what does this college look like?'."

"The idea that we can get it right is unrealistic – we never know what's going to walk through the door. You never know what's going to happen tomorrow morning."

"At the end of the day, I have done everything else but not what I planned. It's the nature of the job."

"What you think is great now and you really work towards and really believe in, in 6 months' time, it's completely different."

"We talk and talk and talk and say this would work, and it doesn't seem as if anything gets actioned. And then, next week, there's a different focus and we'll spend three hours talking about that instead."

"I went back and read my team improvement plan for the year before. I was like 'where has she gone? Look at those hopes and dreams!'."

PRIORITIES ABOVE #7

Visceral Image #2

This image depicts life for college leaders as a hazardous sea voyage or even a battle where they are forced to take on challenges with the odds against them, and keep going only through resilience and grit.

Leaders*:

Starting topic: convincing students to try again after failing.

Ending topic: convincing managers to try again after failing.

What *gets me out of bed* is the chance *to ride the wave* as it *moves forward, not to seek a smoother balance* as a *buffer* where I can *plateau, drop anchor points* and *take on board* a *massage*. No amount of *triangulating* can *map out* what's *on the cards* – I *won't have a clue* if I am *nailed* by *heavy howlers*; they will *break my rod* and make me *fall off the radar*. If anyone takes a *pot* and *shoots me*, the *end-point* is only when I am *hit*. Whatever *rubbish* is *thrown*, I won't be *derailed*. I will *firefight* and *scrape the barrel* to *keep it together* until the *lastminute.com*.

PRIORITIES IN-BETWEEN #1

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.

Key words in-between: hindrance, inconsistency, boundaries, uncertainty

Support staff:

"I do wish the job description wasn't so vague. It's hard to relay to anyone what you do."

"Sometimes, there is no clarification of what your role actually is so that everyone can know who to go to."

"I don't think the managers even know the boundaries of my job."

"We have moved away from having specialists – in my opinion, too much. So, you have people that do the reception, they do exams, they do registration, they do enrolment."

"I've got all these years of experience; I want to impart it, which I'm trying to do but it just feels like I am getting hindered left, right and centre when I try to do it."

"I have to get input from other people but my priorities aren't their priorities."

"A lot of decisions are driven by people who are unable to see outside their own professional self-interest."

"We seem to have to go through loads of different layers to get a decision on anything."

PRIORITIES IN-BETWEEN #2

Visceral Image #3

This image depicts the pressure faced by those in student support roles to meet the needs of demanding students.

Support staff*:

Starting topic: staff being stretched.

Ending topic: students draining resources.

We *police* the *front line*, always *going forward* to *firefight* any *port of call* if *flagged up*, even when *squeezed* and *run down*. We don't *cherry pick* or pay *lip service* to the *cohort* who are *snowed under* and *need a hand*. We go *back to basics* to tie up *loose ends* and *nail* problems. We may *get it in the neck* or be *sold down the river* by those *on board*, but we stay on *the pathway* and don't get *beaten down* even when *thrown on the streets* to *pick up rubbish* or *rolled out* to *suck out mess*.

PRIORITIES IN-BETWEEN #3

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.

Teachers:

"One size doesn't fit all. Staff need to get to know the people in front of them and then work with them in the best way for them all to succeed."

"The biggest pressure for staff is understanding what the student wants."

"Say they are all level 3 or level 2 but actually you've got a huge diversity of issues, abilities, and the teacher has to be very flexible to manage all those needs."

"We don't really know what to do to meet the needs of employment at the moment."

"We need to use other people to show, for example, what we could do for industry."

"We need to be clearer what a learner looks like – yes, they should be learning, they should be achieving but, sometimes, with a 16-year-old, it's life skills they need."

"Everything we do is to aim to make them employable because we want to see them get a job."

"We should be able to get the schools to tell us what they are like at school and, if they are not good at school, why not."

PRIORITIES IN-BETWEEN #4

Visceral Image #4

This image depicts the pressure teachers face from the demands of both students and management. They will either be crushed by the weight of responsibility or find a way to keep going in spite of the difficulty.

Teachers*:

Starting topic: the lack of resources for student groups.

Ending topic: the lack of resources for staff groups.

Students expect to be *spoon-fed* and *switch off*, giving us a *rap on the knuckles* for *rambling about* with lessons that are *not in their dictionary*. We are expected to *pick up the ball* and *offload* it, *pick it up* again and *ping it back, unloading* it as if on a *piece of string* to an *untouchable* colleague *darting through* a gap. We have no time to *draw breath* or *clock off*, *hanging on*, *worn out*, *bogged down* and *hammered* by the demands that *filtered down* from above. We have to *suck it up*, *mad* at having *no comeback*, *feeling the atmosphere* and getting *stretched more* until we *tip up*, something *falls through the cracks* and we get *squished*; or we try *damage limitation*, *man up*, *embrace* the challenge, *find that spark* and keep *whirring* away.

PRIORITIES BELOW #1

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.

Key words below: apathy, disengagement, immaturity

Students:

"I think attendance is particularly challenging here because there's so much going on that it's a distraction for them."

"A lot just don't have any interest in the subject, but a lot of them are only there because their mates are there."

"We don't know why people are skipping the courses, though. What we need to focus on is what is making them not want to come."

"The ones who didn't go to school, then they come here and you're looking for them to be here 90% of the time, and it's a massive struggle."

"Around about 54% of the population that are leaving school here to come into further education have got no qualifications. So, if they've not acquired any qualifications in school, how, in their role here, are they going to progress to a diploma level 1, 2 or 3?"

"It feels like we're lumbered with this – there's this next portion of students and the amount that have EHCPs is staggering."

"If you think of the population of students we have, when I started in FE, a lot of them were level 3; now so much is level 2 and below. Where will those people go?"

"I also think it should have a 'Get-out-of-jail-free' card for when they're older – that says they can have free Maths and English when they're older, because I think, for a lot of them, they're not mature enough to know that they need to do it. They don't want to do it."

PRIORITIES BELOW #2

Visceral Image #5

This image depicts some students as wanting others who are not making an effort to be punished or withdrawn.

Students*:

Starting topic: the lack of sanctions for not working.

Ending topic: not revising for exams.

Teachers don't *bother* to *split off* students *sat on* their backsides for not getting *down to* work; they should get *up their arses* and *moan* and *nag at* their *mess* or even *clamp down* and *kick* them *off* the course.

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.

www.opus.org.uk

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