



O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

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# **LEADING BY LISTENING: REFLECTIVE LEARNING**

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SANDY HENDERSON, OPUS

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# FOREWORD

## Dame Ruth Silver

This is a unique study, and a highly fascinating and valuable one, which the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) has been delighted to fund and publish. It provides a snapshot of where the further education community is at this moment and gives voice to the concerns of sector leaders, teachers, support staff and students.

Giving the people working in further education a space in which to think and elaborate their ideas and preoccupations provided, of course, the rationale for setting up FETL in the first place; for that reason, we have been especially pleased to support OPUS, and Sandy Henderson, who has led the project, in listening to the sector and sharing the results.

The project used the 'listening post' methodology, a research tool that seeks to 'surface' the unspoken assumptions that frame people's understanding of how a system or organisation functions. It began with a group discussion, based around participants' experiences in further education, the transcripts of which are then analysed for 'themes and patterns that speak for the whole sector' and 'unconsciously express some of the characteristics of the wider system to which that group belongs'.

What I like about this approach is that the voices of the sector are allowed to emerge without filter, in a context where facilitation is minimal. One of my longstanding concerns is that while there are numerous groups that speak for the sector or for a part of it – perfectly legitimately – the voices of staff, students and leaders are often missing or muted. This project provides us with more direct access to what is going on among communities of people involved in the everyday delivery of teaching and learning. This is welcome indeed.

I do not wish to say too much in framing the themes that emerge in these thematic papers. There is a complexity here that rewards detailed reading and I would urge readers to start where the researchers began, with the detail of the lived experience of the sector. This is where much of the best work produced by FETL has found its inspiration, and it is where I wish everyone coming to the sector for the first time, and politicians in particular, would begin.

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



O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

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# **LEADING BY LISTENING: REFLECTIVE LEARNING**

Executive Summary

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SANDY HENDERSON, OPUS

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## O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

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

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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

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**33**

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

# HOW IT WORKS

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- 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

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## *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](http://www.fetl.org.uk).

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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



# 1. PRIORITIES

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*"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

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*“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

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*"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

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*"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 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

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*"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

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*"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

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*“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

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## *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.

**Sandy Henderson, OPUS**



O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

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# **LEADING BY LISTENING: REFLECTIVE LEARNING**

## **Paper 1: Priorities**

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SANDY HENDERSON, OPUS

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# LEADING BY LISTENING

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# HOW IT WORKS

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- 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

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## *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](http://www.fetl.org.uk).

# VISCERAL IMAGES

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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

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*"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

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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

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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

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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

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## 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*.

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\* Leaders Group 9

# PRIORITIES ABOVE #5

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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

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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

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## 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*.

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\* Leaders Group 7



# PRIORITIES IN-BETWEEN #1

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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

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## 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*.

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\* *Support staff Group 2*

# PRIORITIES IN-BETWEEN #3

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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

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## 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.

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\* Teachers Group 5

# PRIORITIES BELOW #1

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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

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## 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.

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\* *Students Group 6*



FURTHER EDUCATION  
TRUST FOR LEADERSHIP

O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

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# **LEADING BY LISTENING: REFLECTIVE LEARNING**

## **Paper 2: Compliance**

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SANDY HENDERSON, OPUS

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# LEADING BY LISTENING

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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

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**33**

\*OPUS – An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society Regd. Charity No. 282415 (see p.27)



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## *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 two: Compliance**. 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](http://www.fetl.org.uk).

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# THEME TWO

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## Compliance

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

**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.

# COMPLIANCE ABOVE #1

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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.

Key words above: interference, consequences, regulation

**Leaders:**

*"Stats drive people in Whitehall because it seems logical but they don't see the wider consequences."*

*"I just want to say 'can you just leave us alone for a bit and let us get on with it?'"*

*"The whole education system needs looking at and to move away from league tables and testing and assessment and focus instead on giving students the life skills and resilience so that they are ready to be given those work skills – but at the moment they are not."*

*"We are driven by things that are illogical. We see huge tightening of the vocational curriculum down to 15 pathways at the same time as we see the 15,000th apprenticeship standard being developed by a small group of people who have got a vested interest in making them work."*

*"This is a business but our business is education, so you try and get back to education all the time, but actually you're constantly sucked into numbers, PR, all of the measurables."*

*"We are in a highly over-regulated system."*

# COMPLIANCE ABOVE #2

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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.

## **Leaders:**

*"What gets me at the moment the most is the lack of trust in us as a sector. We are regulated to bloody death at the moment. I have never known anything like it."*

*"I don't understand why we hire professional people and bring in professional managers and professional systems of governance who then are not trusted to get on with it."*

*"It comes down to trust, in each other and our teams, and they trust us."*

*"We do some pretty stupid things in the sector, though, don't we, that explain them not trusting us. We score some pretty classic own goals."*

*"Teaching, of all the occupations out there, is the one that is more scrutinized than any."*

*"People do stuff and don't realise that by doing this thing or not doing this thing, a whole bunch of other people they have never even met are going to be impacted if they fail to do this thing correctly or to do it at all."*

# COMPLIANCE ABOVE #3

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## Visceral Image #6

This image depicts college leaders as having to work miracles with meagre resources, satisfying the demands of their masters.

**Leaders\*:**

**Starting topic:** time pressure.

**Ending topic:** pressure for results.

To *set the scene*, we are the *poor cousin* or *poor relations* who have *fallen off the radar*, *running around from pillar to post* like *Cinderella*, *pinching* a *stale chunk* of bread *dipped* in water *with a wind blowing*.

Like *round pegs in square holes*, we must offer a *Rolls Royce service with Skoda parts*, *equipped* with an *extra string to our bow* and, *with these strings*, *harness invisible skills* to achieve *miracles*. With the *goalposts moving*, we are *under the cosh* to produce a *lightbulb moment* for students. We must *juggle wiping their arse*, *cushioned with cotton wool*, while *taking their hand in a pampering stage*.

We *push* on in this *cut-throat* scene crawling *muddied* through a *minefield*, under the *hammer* and lacking *clout*, *churning out* results even at *breaking point*. If we *switch off* and *scratch the surface* or *spill* a drop, it may *hit* or *bang on* something that *destroys* us. Only by *shining the light in the corner* and not *losing sight* of our *destination* will we move *along the avenue* and *come through the door*. If we *knock off* or give up the *chase*, we would *shoot ourselves in the foot* and *flatline*, and we will be *back to square one*.

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\* Leaders Group 2



# COMPLIANCE ABOVE #4

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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.

**Leaders:**

*"Sometimes we exacerbate that situation by being super-compliant as a sector."*

*"We never get to go and say 'actually, no, we're not going to comply with your ridiculous chaotic requests for this particular fund; just give us the money'. We never do."*

*"We've been at fault for being so flexible and responsive that we give a message that says 'you can chuck anything at us and we'll deal with it'."*

*"We should band together and say 'enough is enough'."*

*"We just dance to whatever tune that is thrown at us."*

*"Maybe it's about being willing to say 'actually I'm not going to do that. That's not priority for me right now' and that being acceptable."*

*"We've got to say 'no, that's not how I lead organisations' and push back."*

# COMPLIANCE ABOVE #5

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## Visceral Image #7

This image depicts leaders as pulled in two directions at every turn, always glimpsing a narrow landing strip that meets the needs of everyone but is fraught with danger. They may glimpse a brighter financial future but must not risk their reputation or self-esteem to achieve it.

**Leaders\*:**

**Starting topic:** being hopeful about the future.

**Ending topic:** the importance of wellbeing.

Our role is *to dance to those drums*, to *dance to whatever tune will tug on the heartstrings*. When *we pull strings*, there are more *strings attached*. Should we *band together on the journey* and *pick our battles* to *get more of a voice*, or *bust a gut* to *fight on every front* and risk *toppling over*?

We are *on the cusp* between *Jekyll and Hyde*, *yin and yang* – as we *crawl into the water*, seeking *a path through*, it *ebbs and flows*, with *drag left and right*. As we *pitch up* and *go off the edge*, water *pours in* and we are *sucked into* it, *dragging everybody down*. Then it *wanes*, and we *stretch* and *grab at green shoots*, staying *on the back foot* so as not to *tip over the edge* and *go to the wall*.

We seek *a light at the end of the tunnel* but will *get lost* unless we *play a different game* – a *numbers game*. By *game changing*, we can keep *plates spinning* but must be *flight footed* to walk a *fine line* and *land on a postage stamp* without *kicking back and scoring own goals*. Then, the *beautiful trauma* we escaped by ignoring the *big picture* would be *mirrored*: the *fickle finger of scrutiny* would *poke our bruises* and *blow it out of proportion*. Everything would be *battered down*; we would be *tarnished with a brush* and become *rotten eggs* that have *hit the bottom of the barrel*.

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\*Leaders Group 3

# COMPLIANCE IN-BETWEEN #1

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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.

**Key words in-between: accountability, motivation, distortion**

**Support staff:**

*"I feel that, really, I'm a business manager and conversations around curriculum, offer, teaching and learning are non-existent."*

*"I think that's the most frustrating thing, having those people who say 'that's not in my job description'. It's really irritating."*

*"You get the same serial offenders going off sick and there don't seem to be any consequences or any taking accountability."*

*"It's difficult when you get reliant on one person and then, at certain pinch-points, they go off sick and everyone else says it's not their job."*

*"If you are ill when you are here, then you feel like you have still got to come in. You know no one is going to cover. So, you keep going and keep going and finally, you shut down."*

*"There's a great lack of understanding from the academic down to the administration of, if you don't do things, the impact it has on staff and on the department and the amount of work it creates."*

# COMPLIANCE IN-BETWEEN #2

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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.

## **Support staff:**

*"It is a case of getting on the course, getting that letter to say they are on it and then we wonder why the retention's bad."*

*"Or they need to be there because Mum needs to still claim her tax credits. That is huge and they are told 'go off and do a course'."*

*"There's a student who picks his bus pass up every week but I know for a fact, he's only here once a week."*

*"Students come in, sign up, we give them a letter for the council to get free council tax. When they withdraw within a couple of weeks, nobody lets the council know. Which is fraud."*

*"We should be able to write a letter saying 'this student has withdrawn; they are no longer in full-time education'. Why should I have to pay council tax?"*

*"A couple of years ago, it was said on Facebook 'go to the college, sign up for hairdressing and you'll get a free kit. Then just leave. That was the word on the street."*

*"You have a student who says 'I don't want to be here; it's stressing me out; I'm going to commit suicide'. You tell him 'you don't have to be here' and you phone his Mum and she says 'this is not my problem. You have to deal with this or I will lose the benefits. I know he doesn't want to be here but he has to be.' What do you do?"*

# COMPLIANCE IN-BETWEEN #3

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## Visceral Image #8

This image depicts support staff as having to work under intense scrutiny dealing with undeserving as well as deserving students.

**Support staff\*:**

**Starting topic: communication breakdown.**

**Ending topic: the need for praise and reassurance.**

We *gear up* for a *new cohort* by being *wired up* to the *proper channels*, always *touching base* to stay *on the same page* and *hit the ground running*. Some students *go downhill* and *drop off the face of the earth* because they have *switched off* or their *cogs are not working*. We *do a sweep* to rescue *fallen angels* and *signpost* a *light at the end of the tunnel*. We offer a *praise sandwich* for those with too much *crammed on their plate* who *buckle* when *overloaded*.

Our *bugbear* is the *serial offenders* who *swan about* and *shout loud enough*, ready to *kick off* if we don't *float their boat*. They *barge in fullbore* with a *battering ram* hoping to *work the system*. We are *set up for a fall* and *pick up flack* when we *pick up* their *voice in our ear*.

Work is a *never-ending cycle* spent *going full circle in a goldfish bowl*. It is *full on* but *fragmented* so we *put a plaster on it* and *put it in a box*. Like a *caveman family shuffling around* on our *knuckles*, we are *under the cosh*, *dragged by the hair* towards a *large pot*. We either *jump in* or go *from the frying pan into the fire*.

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\*Support staff Group 5

# COMPLIANCE IN-BETWEEN #4

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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.

## **Teachers:**

*"If you immediately give an area a target that's not achievable, you'll get into a situation where people will be forced to – how can I say this – make things up, to make it achievable, blur the line, instead of trying to do something properly."*

*"We are probably more flexible than we should be about attendance and behaviour. You know that, if that student drops out, you are going to get in trouble and your course is put under threat."*

*"The big thing, going back to a bit of wellbeing, is actually believing in yourself and believing in what you do, to stand up and go 'no, this is wrong; this is what we should be delivering'. Sometimes you feel a bit downtrodden."*

*"If people aren't turning up to courses and not caring and not actually wanting to be there, there is no point in keeping them on the course."*

*"EIP – what a con what a scam, what a scandal!. How is it that was not picked up in the recent audit?"*

*"I'm flabbergasted that awarding bodies haven't identified the cut in teaching hours and what we're delivering versus college FE requirements. You're signing up to an awarding body where you have to deliver x amount of hours of teaching and that's not being done, yet we're still expected to deliver the same results."*

# COMPLIANCE IN-BETWEEN #5

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## Visceral Image #9

This image depicts teachers as knowingly set an impossible task and then blamed for failing to deliver it.

**Teachers\*:**

**Starting topic:** being watched by senior management.

**Ending topic:** not being understood by senior management.

College is the *flagship* run by *dinosaurs riding in on their white steeds*. They don't want the *overflow* to *land on their laps* when the *groundswell* hits a *rocky patch* and *makes waves*.

We are the *battery hens wearing two hats*: first, to be *clowns* in a *goldfish bowl* who *kill ourselves chasing this carrot* to *juggle from pillar to post* while *jumping through hoops*; second, to be *robots*, treated like *poor cousins* and made to *bust our arses* and *flog ourselves to death* to *blur the lines* in a *grey area* to ensure a *snapshot* finish.

We go *flat out* in a *heart-breaking box-ticking exercise*, *wrung out* to *mental breaking point* trying to *magic things out of thin air*. If, despite reciting *chapter and verse* in an *echo chamber*, we take *huge strides* but *plateau over a barrier* and *fall over, fragmented*, we face a *kangaroo court: down comes the sledgehammer* and *down comes the axe* to *land on the doormat*.

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\*Teachers Group 1

# COMPLIANCE IN-BETWEEN #6

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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.

## **Teachers:**

*"Our targets were attendance, punctuality, retention and achievement. And if you didn't get your figures, you didn't get your pay review."*

*"When I have my appraisal, it will be all about my retention rate and how many students didn't pass and why."*

*"It's not our responsibility but it still falls on us – if there's a safeguarding issue and they are not here, we are still penalised for their attendance."*

*"If students are absent, you can't leave the class to find them. You will get allowance if they miss GCSE Maths and English but not for the other stuff. You are responsible for chasing them."*

*"One of the things I say, when people come for a job and I say 'why do you want to teach?' and they say 'because I've got a passion for the subject' is to say 'well go and do it then!'."*

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



# COMPLIANCE IN-BETWEEN #7

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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.

**Teachers:**

*"You can get your qualification and get a job not knowing anything."*

*"Some courses we have offered haven't helped the students to progress, because the qualification isn't a good qualification."*

*"What's the point of putting them on a course that we know they are not going to succeed on?"*

*"Sometimes you reinforce failure by giving them a qualification they can't pass."*

*"They come out with qualifications but they are not competent."*

*"You hunt around to find an appropriate qualification to give that learner and quite often they fail it because it doesn't fit what it is that you need to teach them."*

*"From the industry point of view, they're coming back and saying 'what you're actually teaching isn't relevant. What we're getting from apprenticeships, your young people coming through, they haven't got the skills mainly because they're not taught it in college.'"*

# COMPLIANCE BELOW #1

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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.

**Key words below: indiscipline, control, copying**

**Students:**

*"There is not much discipline in the local schools, from what we see. They come with all this baggage and learn what they can get away with and what they can do."*

*"It felt to me like a lot of students were just here because they thought 'it's going to be easy' and it was just for the sake of doing a college course because they'd come out of education and then literally needed somewhere to go."*

*"What I've noticed this year is a lot of kids with discipline problems, not following the rules."*

*"The loss of role models is a problem for youth behaviour. That again impacts on attendance, because they start getting involved in things that they shouldn't; they're on the streets."*

*"Some teachers know how to deal with it and some don't. You've got teachers who can dominate in class, know how to control the class and teachers who can't."*

*"Bullying is massive. I was literally getting shouting, swearing, punching in the face. And they still haven't sorted it out yet."*

*"I am looking at this 18-year old girl saying to me 'I want a time out card'. She has no EHCP; she has absolutely no reason for that requirement. It's stressful because we are feeding it."*

# COMPLIANCE BELOW #2

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## Visceral Image #10

This image depicts a characteristic student experience of being overwhelmed by conventional teaching methods, with authoritarian teachers mistaking their panic and frustration as ill-discipline.

**Students\*:**

**Starting topic:** dissatisfaction with teaching methods.

**Ending topic:** the hazards of voicing dissatisfaction with teaching methods.

Learning is a *full-on* experience *from my end*: they teach *a load* of *bumped up rubbish*, too *packed* to *absorb*, too *jumbled-up* to *have a go at*. They *spring it on* you like a *shadow in the mist* until you *get messed* by it.

If you got *handy* and *fought for* a *new story*, you get *kicked out*. If you say what *bugs* you and admit you are *all over the place*, *drowning in* it, *falling behind*, they *push you* back *under the river*.

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\*Students Group 10

# COMPLIANCE BELOW #3

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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.

## **Students:**

*"People who aren't good at lessons struggle to concentrate and be interested. They can be challenging and start arguments because they don't want to be there."*

*"If you know that a student doesn't want to be here and they are playing up in class and they are affecting the learning of other students, you are saying to your boss 'they don't want to be here' but they won't withdraw them, that can be quite frustrating, can't it?"*

*"We had five Stage 3s and two of them have been excluded completely. What's going to happen to those kids? I worry about them."*

*"They will come in and threaten you with knives; they'll threaten to beat you up; they will threaten to come and find you because that's their personality. Obviously, they're not that bad otherwise we wouldn't take them but they have an outburst and then that happens."*

*"Dare I say it: to be sworn at, violence, not meeting their needs because of their mental capacity. You are not equipped to deal with this."*

*"They might be having separate issues outside which might prevent them from coming into college, which is understandable. Things like home issues, alcohol abuse, substance abuse, domestic abuse, crime, getting involved in something they shouldn't."*

# COMPLIANCE BELOW #4

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## Visceral Image #11

This image depicts students' classroom experience as a physical fight, perhaps between (academic) head and (vocational) hands.

**Students\*:**

**Starting topic:** waiting to receive counselling support.

**Ending topic:** exams as the cause of depression.

Class *kicks off* if you *turn up*: you get *slapped in the face* and the pain *kicks in*. You must *take that on your own head* or be *dumped on* the floor. You either *grimace and bear it* or *get at the first hand* and *bring it up* to *the face*. If you *push everyone down* like a *rolling ball*, going *round in a circle*, it may be a *step too far*. So if a challenge *comes to light*, *knuckle down* or *duck out*.

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\*Students Group 4

# COMPLIANCE BELOW #5

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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.

**Students:**

*"The problem is the punishments are too lax. About half our class got warnings for plagiarism."*

*"Sometimes, you and a friend at another college may have the same unit. They can send the assignment to you and you can submit it."*

*"There are sites where you can pay someone to do your assignment for you. I don't see the point of assignment."*

*"It's quite easy to catch people. Most people don't write proper English so you can tell when they have copy and pasted it. Some disguise it. We have to do an online exam every week but our teacher basically told us to cheat on that – just copy and paste answers into it. We are required to do it but we don't need to."*

*"It's all cut and paste. Tutors don't care."*

*"I have found, on the level 1 course, the teachers aren't enforcing literally anything. You can turn up for lessons when you want. People were literally not turning up and there were no repercussions for it. I have jumped from level 1 to level 3 and the difference is total."*



O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

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# **LEADING BY LISTENING: REFLECTIVE LEARNING**

## **Paper 3: Capacity**

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SANDY HENDERSON, OPUS

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# LEADING BY LISTENING

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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

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- 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

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## *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 three: Capacity**. 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](http://www.fetl.org.uk).

# VISCERAL IMAGES

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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.

# THEME THREE

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## Capacity

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

**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.

# CAPACITY ABOVE #1

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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.

**Key words above: overload, demands, culture, overtime**

**Leaders:**

*"You are given a job you can't accomplish, that's the true definition of stress."*

*"I have been in the sector for just over 4 years and, in that time, there have been increases in pressure and complexity, reductions in funding, new pots of funding adding to bureaucracy, additional skills needed by staff to respond to all these changes, and there is no funding to back it up."*

*"People feel stressed because they care and can't do the job as well as they want to. This comes out as stress but it is because they care."*

*"We are asking a lot of our staff when, dare I say it, in the back of our minds, we know they are not going to achieve it, however hard they work."*

*"The old days of heroic leaders are gone. You're going to burn out, actually."*

*"There are stresses that are put on me and stresses that I put on myself. And I know that I put more on myself than other people put on me."*

*"I don't feel I'm good at any part of my job because I am not given time to excel at it."*

# CAPACITY ABOVE #2

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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:**

*"It feels like you're only one thing away from something tipping you over the edge."*

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

*"Those pressures are often felt in that middle-management tier, as they are the jam in the sandwich. They absorb heat from both ways, trying to keep the momentum and morale and, as everyone says, having more things put into their pot and having no extra time to do those things."*

*"You are semi-in-a-daze but you are still doing your job."*

*"Two weeks ago, I was being stopped in the corridor every 30 seconds to tell me I didn't have staff or to be told I've got rooms of 40. I didn't have headspace. I was an absorbed sponge."*

*"It goes from being a very nice job that enables you to do things that you like to do and you end up struggling with bits that have been added on."*

*"On occasions, of course, we just go too far."*

# CAPACITY ABOVE #3

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## Visceral Image #12

This image depicts the bureaucratic burden imposed on teachers that compromises their effectiveness in the classroom.

**Leaders\*:**

**Starting topic: the increase in issues for staff to deal with.**

**Ending topic: the lack of staff to meet demand.**

Staff are *all-singing-and-all-dancing* performers *wrapped up* in a *sugarcoat* with *rose-tinted glasses*, but the *frozen* ice is *cracking* beneath their feet. We have been *side-tracked* into *number crunching* but what we are *feeding into* makes a *rod for their back*.

They *signpost* to *stop the bus* and *switch off* the engine because they are *knackered*, at *breaking point and stretched so thin* they can't keep their *head above water*. Our *bean counting* is now *off the scale* but it is a *bugbear* for them and creates a *dog's dinner*.

We make a *massive push* to *throw one on the top* and *move forward* with this *direction of travel* but it oversteps *boundaries*, *racks up* time and *wipes* their schedule. They are so *squeezed* and *frazzled* that, instead of *tailoring materials* to *light a fire* in students, they *are firefighting* and teaching *on the fly*. When reality *kicks in* that they are *sinking*, they *kick and scream* and *dig their heels in*, but are *turned away* and cut no *slack*.

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\*Leaders Group 10



# CAPACITY ABOVE #4

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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.

**Leaders:**

*"So, yeah, we are all guilty, when the kids go to bed at 9pm, of the laptop going on."*

*"What they play on with people like us is our level of professionalism and our own self-evaluation of our performance."*

*"As you take on more responsibility and there are more demands and you want to get good results, it's going to impact on your time and your wellbeing."*

*"As soon as senior managers start not doing emails past 5pm on Friday until 8am on Monday, then other people will see that that's OK to do that. If I don't answer my email on a Sunday, I get a text."*

*"Why set a culture where it is OK to send emails in the evening and weekends?"*

*"In my team, we make a conscious effort not to email each other at night because that's how we manage things, because all you need to do is look at that one email at nine at night and then it stresses you out and you don't sleep at night. Then you come in next morning and it's not that big a deal."*

# CAPACITY IN-BETWEEN #1

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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.

**Key words in-between: demands, overtime, overload**

**Support staff:**

*"Staff are under huge pressure. They are at breaking point, seriously."*

*"I probably deal with about three cases of self-harm a week. Since I've been here, I've dealt with at least one suicide a week. That's just in one area."*

*"The issues at play are more risky than in previous years. I find as a mentor we aren't working with outside agencies any more. That social provision isn't there."*

*"We can't do it all for everybody. Our local authority isn't where it needs to be. Social services are inadequate. We work closely with them but they just can't deal with it."*

*"We've got GPs referring students back to us for counselling or support because the external service doesn't exist."*

*"It's the police services having a word with us over the weekend and saying 'can you pick misdemeanours over the weekend up with students when they come back on Monday morning?'. They can't deal with it."*

*"The stress that we deal with on the ground; that level of stress is very different. We are good as an organisation at recognising that but I don't think, externally, people realise that that is a lot of what we do."*

*"Our mentor is that busy we don't get to speak to them. Chasing students up all the time. Throughout the lessons."*

# CAPACITY IN-BETWEEN #2

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## Visceral Image #13

This image depicts leaders as detached from reality, acting out a fantasy of power but in fact merely passing their burden onto staff without acknowledging its impact upon them.

**Support staff\*:**

**Starting topic:** the cyclical nature of education policy.

**Ending topic:** failure to appreciate achievement.

We are *Minions* doing the *groundwork* to *mop up* for those in *emperor's new clothes* who *play a role* as *kings of the castle* but lack a *personal touch*. They *eye* new *routes* as a *stepping stone* to a new *destination* but make us carry *all the baggage ratcheted up* in *double decker* formation *on our backs*.

Like *an injection of shockwaves* that *cascade* through the *body*, they *backtrack* and our *destination* is *thrown out* and *spun on its head*. *Snowed under*, we *lose the plot* and *go round in circles*. It is a *nightmare* with no one to *pick up the slack*.

*More* is *squeezed into* our *Mary Poppins Bag* until it goes *through the roof*, our *balance* reaches *teetering point* and it *bounces* in a *deep dive* down *the chalk face*.

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\*Support staff Group 6

# CAPACITY IN-BETWEEN #3

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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.

## **Teachers:**

*"I don't have time to be the best teacher I can be because of all the other stuff."*

*"There is one resource that they can continuously tap into until they reach breaking point which is your time. That is what they will do until people start to break."*

*"My previous job was training troops to deploy to Afghanistan and Iraq. I'm under more pressure in teaching, being checked and regulated."*

*"If you're not careful, you will quickly end up doing 50, 60, 70 plus hours a week and weekends and evenings."*

*"We have contracted staff year by year by year, and we are at the bare bones of our staff."*

*"The biggest problem is going to be time."*

*"There's not enough time to do stuff to a good level, is there."*

*"A lot of staff live from day to day because anything else is impossible. They just don't have the resources to do more."*

# CAPACITY IN-BETWEEN #4

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## Visceral Image #14

This image depicts teacher unhappiness at the onerous administrative responsibilities imposed upon them without any additional time, pay or resources to discharge them.

**Teachers\*:**

**Starting topic:** excessive admin.

**Ending topic:** excessive admin.

We live in the *shadow* of *a million things* to do. We are *stripped to the bone* until what are *stripped back* or *stripped away* become *bones of contention*. This is a *nightmare* of a long *distance travelled*, *breaking the heart* of those *longer in the tooth* as the *fruits of their labours* are *squashed* and *skewed*.

*Gaps* in our time *disappear* as we *pop back* from our *cubby hole* on *command* to be *pushed* or *pulled into* providing *cover across the board*. Work *flows* are *played around with* and what we would *put across* to students as the *building blocks* are *shut down* or put *on the back burner*. *Hanging on* through our *bond* with students, we *pull together* to try to *turn it round*.

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\*Teachers Group 2

# CAPACITY IN-BETWEEN #5

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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.

## **Teachers:**

*"They say 'this is a really important thing. Can we do it in lunchtime?'"*

*"We don't really keep a work-life balance, unless you actually say no. That's what you try to do and then you get told 'no, you've got to do it'."*

*"We do unpaid lunch and unpaid tea breaks. That is the only time you get to talk to them, but we are not paid for that time."*

*"People see me at my desk and think I am available. They sit down and they've got this massive list and I am thinking 'I've got all my stuff to do' but am too polite to say 'please go away'."*

*"Admin time is fifteen minutes at the start of the day, fifteen minutes in the breaks, all classed as admin time. It's not."*

*"In that time, I have booked off as admin time, I'm also line managing people and lesson planning and making resources all on my own and I can't ask for that support from other people because everyone else has the same issue."*

*"My over-19 adult learners, I've now been told I've got to write parent reports for. They have weekly tutorials; they have just had their six-week reviews; they have all been set targets; and we give very detailed feedback on their work, which is consistently praised by exam boards and management. So now I have got to write the same thing again for what will be the third time. Why?"*

# CAPACITY BELOW #1

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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.

**Key words below: pressure, overload, going blank**

**Students:**

*"That's why I chose College over sixth form, because I didn't want to do exams."*

*"Half the parents are not aware of what the students have got to cope with because of all the pressures they're under."*

*"Most people know the pressure on them. I don't need someone to say to me 'you've got to work harder', as my mum used to say to me."*

*"If I am taking it serious and I want to pass, I don't sleep."*

*"I get very stressed giving in my essays because I feel like I've done them all wrong but, when I receive them back, the criticism you get from the tutors, especially the ones we have, is positive – it just makes you feel better about what you've done."*

*"What's making everything stressful is how jumbled up everything is."*

*"I used to feel I was being a nuisance when I felt under pressure at school."*

*"I feel the work is too easy. The free time is stupid."*

# CAPACITY BELOW #2

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## Visceral Image #15

This image depicts students' experience of feeling overwhelmed by the high-pressure approach to GCSEs at school.

**Students\*:**

**Starting topic: the transition from school.**

**Ending topic: the transition to employment.**

The *old school* approach put *a lot on our plate*: we were *chucked in, plunged in* or *pushed aside* and given a *slap on the wrist* if we made a *mess* of it. Teachers *bombarded* us with an intense *hammering in* of information, then *bugged* us and *chased us up*.

*Both sides of the spectrum* were *in the same boat*, which would *flip on its head* if the water got *bouncy*. Some would *keep an ear out* so they could *go with the flow* and *get* their *head around* the lesson. Others would *call out* for help to keep our *heads up* as water *brushed over* us, leaving only *bubbles*.

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\*Students Group 2



# CAPACITY BELOW #3

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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.

**Students:**

*"They get the better results because they are not putting the pressure on us."*

*"With assignments, the stress is spread out over the entire year whereas with exams it is all dumped on you at the end of the year."*

*"It is not so much about giving them the knowledge to do the exam, it's learning to take the exam itself."*

*"We have people who can't sit a test but are excellent practitioners – they can't work under that pressure."*

*"Everyone gets overwhelmed at some point by system overload. To learn, you have to be able to calm yourself down and then go back and have another go."*

*"It's not overwhelming, it's broken down into smaller chunks."*

*"You get to go at your own pace."*

*"I struggle to keep up with the pace, with the way I learn, pretty much."*

# CAPACITY BELOW #4

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## Visceral Image #16

This image depicts college as an inclusive experience that engages students and helps them to progress at their own pace.

**Students\*:**

**Starting topic:** being treated like an adult.

**Ending topic:** becoming more grown up.

Our *customer experience* is that teachers *cater to everyone* and *give us pointers*. If we *fall back* and *fall behind* the *grade boundaries*, they won't *turn a blind eye* and let us *zone out under their noses* or *label you* as having *screwed up*. They help me *get over myself* so I can *get to grips with* the course. It is like *being a baby*: the teacher *breaks it down* so it is *spread out* and I can *connect with* it and start *running with it*.

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\*Students Group 11

# CAPACITY BELOW #5

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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.

## **Students:**

*"When you are on the spot, your mind goes blank but, as soon as you are off that spotlight, you think that's what you meant to say."*

*"When you do GCSEs, it's in your head and then, when you do it, you think 'what is the answer?' and leave out stuff. You get the questions and you know the answer but you answer it wrong. When you are put on the spot, you don't know what to say."*

*"When it comes to yes/no questions, I know what the answer is but my brain is telling me to do something else. Like you know the answer is 'Yes', but you are looking at 'No'. You know it's 'Yes' but you tick 'No'. I do that every time."*

*"Every time a test comes, all the information goes out the window and it won't come back until the exam's done, and I've written gibberish on the paper."*

*"There is a disconnect for students between what they show on testing and what they actually know."*

*"I get why they have exams, but it's just that they don't completely show your true colours. Someone can have an off-day any day."*

*"You overthink stuff and too many ideas come in. You try and put them down and it just looks like a bunch of words not put together. Then, when you try to put them together, you don't have enough time."*

# CAPACITY BELOW #6

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## Visceral Image #17

This image depicts students' experience of going blank during exams and not doing themselves justice.

**Students\*:**

**Starting topic:** problems with the timetable.

**Ending topic:** overcoming disadvantages.

You are *screwed* if you get *mad* or *bang your head* when exam questions are *compressed* or *messed up*. Don't *open your mouth* to *put yourself down*. The way to *pass go* is to *chase* the *dead silence* away and not to be put *off*.

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\*Students Group 7



O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

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# **LEADING BY LISTENING: REFLECTIVE LEARNING**

## **Paper 4: Effectiveness**

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SANDY HENDERSON, OPUS

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# LEADING BY LISTENING

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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

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**33**

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

# HOW IT WORKS

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- 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

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## *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 four: Effectiveness**. 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](http://www.fetl.org.uk).



# VISCERAL IMAGES

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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.

# THEME FOUR

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## Effectiveness

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

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 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.

# EFFECTIVENESS ABOVE #1

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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.

**Key words above: learning, resilience, consistency, good**

**Leaders:**

*"Sometimes it's 'What you are actually doing is good'. 'Yes, but it's not outstanding, is it?'"*

*"People in FE are resilient, by and large, because we're dealing all the time with a pressured challenging environment."*

*"There are so many things that can't always go right but you can reflect and get it right next time."*

*"I had the knockbacks. I had to go 'OK, I need to regroup; I need to learn this because this is what let me down'."*

*"Because of the top down model – always saying 'we're not good enough yet', they have made staff feel not good enough too."*

*"I spoke to a principal recently – I won't say who or at what college – who said 'We aim for Good. I want all my staff to aim for good. That's good for mental health, for workload. We are happy with Good'."*

*"Sometimes you have to put yourself through it to, kind of, get a little bit of a self-assessment."*

*"That's the whole mission of this college overall. Whatever works for you, just do it."*

# EFFECTIVENESS ABOVE #2

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## Visceral Image #18

This image depicts how what works for successful colleges is finding course that work for their students.

**Leaders\*:**

**Starting topic:** changes in the classroom.

**Ending topic:** finding the right route for students.

Our *cohort disconnects* unless we ask *quick-fire* questions to *unpick* our courses and *pick up the pieces again* to *fill in gaps*. To *acclimatise* students, we add *milestones* to their *journey*. We *tailor* content to *pick up focus* and increase *ownership*. And we *check in* to *pockets* of uncertainty and *switch clicks* to *hand on* a better programme.

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\* Leaders Group 8

# EFFECTIVENESS IN-BETWEEN #1

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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.

**Key words in-between:** mistakes, achievement, recognition, ambition

**Support staff:**

*"If you can't leave school without Maths and English, a lot of people with learning difficulties are going to end up here."*

*"They are in FE because the schools don't want to keep them."*

*"It's the lower levels where the schools just don't want to know."*

*"Like on Tinder, if they like the student, [Schools] swipe 'Tick'. If not, they swipe 'Cross'."*

*"By the time they come to us, any joy in Maths or English or most other academic subjects has been completely drummed out of them by nasty experiences in secondary school."*

*"No-one can learn without making some mistakes."*

*"For some learners, newness is inspiring. Especially for those that need to reinvent themselves, it's nice to have something new to go for. Others need stability, so we try and give them stability."*

*"It provides that pathway, a way of escaping from being written off."*

# EFFECTIVENESS IN-BETWEEN #2

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## Visceral Image #19

*Support staff\*:*

**Starting topic:** work that is unseen and taken for granted.

**Ending topic:** the recurrent nature of social problems.

Students are like a *bubble pumped full* of *blankness* in a *nursery of rebellion*; college is *built up* as their *big ticket to Nirvana* but, when they don't show up *hot off the press*, our *wrists are tied*, *barriers* are *slammed* down and we feel *jilted*. All we can do is *start off from scratch*, *flip the coin over* and *go round in a circle*.

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\*Support staff Group 1

# EFFECTIVENESS IN-BETWEEN #3

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The starting point for teachers, as it is for management and students, is to work out 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.

## **Teachers:**

*"We don't focus on what we haven't got but on what we have got and how we are going to use it really well. This leads to the questions we raise with our students: 'What are you going to do with what you've got?'"*

*"We've all done our Cert. Eds and our PGCEs and we've all come and done the job and quickly abandoned them. We haven't abandoned them and become a void; we have developed our own strategies and theories."*

*"We have recruited some inexperienced teachers who say 'This is the only job I've had where I have gone home at the end of the day thinking I've done a rubbish job.'"*

*"Sometimes we forget how well we are doing because of all the other things going on."*

*"The achievement of students is the one saving grace."*

*"Even a lesson that worked particularly well last year, you are still tweaking to make it right for the group in front of you."*

*"Imagine trying to house people who are practical people and making them sit through theory classes all day every day all week. It's crazy."*

*"You can't live off theory, you need that practical element."*



# EFFECTIVENESS IN-BETWEEN #4

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## Visceral Image #20

This image depicts how teachers embed Maths and English into vocational courses to give them a practical context for students.

*Teachers\*:*

**Starting topic: embedding functional skills into vocational skills.**

**Ending topic: embedding functional skills into vocational skills.**

Instead of *reinventing the wheel*, we *tap up* student *buy-in* by *picking holes* in lessons to *liberate resources* that can be *tied in along the line* of their interest. Once *picked apart* the lessons can be *woven into* material that will help students *switch on* and get a *head start*. Then you can *crack on* and they will *comeback*.

---

\*Teachers Group 6

# EFFECTIVENESS IN-BETWEEN #5

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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:**

*"It's all based on results. If you don't teach them to pass the exam, then you'll lose your job."*

*"We take non-traditional learners and we get them through those programmes and, for me, that's what makes us special."*

*"We do an awful lot as a sector. But, in the end, they have to go into the exam and do it, for themselves."*

*"If you think about what proves we are good at our job. From my point of view, it's that kid that goes from level one to level six. That's what proves you've done a good job."*

*"There is no recognition of the distance travelled."*

*"Sometimes the achievement for them is to attend."*

*"For some learners, it is just coming in 50% of the time. They would never have been to school at all. So, it's having that complete differentiation and being brave enough to allow our professionals and our colleagues to judge it."*

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

# EFFECTIVENESS IN-BETWEEN #6

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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.

## **Teachers:**

*"If you can't learn and make some mistakes, you can't develop."*

*"We encourage students to give it their best shot, to try as well as they can."*

*"Making mistakes is really important. That's the importance of self-reflection.. If they think they have done fantastic, that's where we use 'Even Better If'."*

*"If there is one thing with my learners is that they are too afraid to get things wrong."*

*"It's key to the success of the organisation not to dwell on their mental health issues or their problems. It's all about saying 'yes, you've got that problem but you've always had it. These are the techniques and strategies we are going to use to move you forward but the whole point is that, if you get educated, you can change your life. Again, that's what FE is, isn't it?"*

*"[We say] 'OK, you may have had a knock-back and failed but how did you deal with that?' So that builds resilience and so you can apply that to the wider world."*

*"Rather than just listing things off, they'll go 'here's how you do this, have a go yourself and, if you have any issues with it, I'll come over and help you'."*

*"We try to help learners have ambition; it's just measured ambitions."*

# EFFECTIVENESS BELOW #1

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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.

Key words below: reset, chances, maturity

## **Students:**

*"I have heard that the common phrase at school is 'That's so BTEC' as if that's a negative thing to do."*

*"[School] tell you that college is for drop-outs."*

*"In school, they don't teach you how to teach yourself. In college, they do."*

*"The value in learning is about those small goals, those small wins, that sense of achievement, that sense of belonging – all those sorts of things. That helps people's mental health."*

*"You get the constant 'achieve-reset'."*

*"The biggest thing is 'don't move onto Task 2 until we've finished Task 1 and we know what mistakes we are making.'"*

*"Even if it is a longer way round, I would prefer to do it my way."*

*"At the end of the day, we are doing it for ourselves so, if you're not willing to come in and do the work, then what's the point of being here?"*

# EFFECTIVENESS BELOW #2

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## Visceral Image #21

This depicts the way in which many students rebel against the rigid uniformity of school whereas, at college, they have space to get to grips with their individual limitations and start to make progress.

**Students\*:**

**Starting topic:** being busy and struggling to deliver what is asked of them.

**Ending topic:** learning to do things themselves with less support.

We show up *on board* bundled together like *guinea pigs* in a *mixed bag*, a *tight-knit* unit *in the same boat* who, if we *get closer*, will *touch on* each other and *merge together*. Our *hands are tied*, and so we *fight, being a pain* and *doing my head in*.

We can *fall behind, get behind* and *throw away* our chance or we can *start from scratch*, turn the bag *inside-out* and get to *action-stations*. *Coming from* this to *get a jump* and be *one-up* means we must *push ourselves*, be *hands on*, have our *head screwed* on and take *a leap* into *space* if we are to *grasp on* to the chance *knocking on the door*.

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\*Students Group 5

# EFFECTIVENESS BELOW #3

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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.

## **Students:**

*"There's only one thing stopping you. It's not everyone else, it's yourself. You can stop yourself."*

*"What I do to stop myself is sit there and think for a minute 'Do I really want this course? Do I really want to pass?' Whatever I was going to do, I stop and pay attention."*

*"It's not just 'if you get an education, you can be out there' – that's part of it, but it's also about those achievements and wins and learning to deal with failure in a safe place."*

*"When I get to college, I am learning mainly what not to do another day."*

*"By failing, you can learn. Failing is not always a bad thing. At some point when you bang your head, it's finished."*

*"It's not really a linear path – we've all come to it in weird ways and by doing other stuff."*

*"He's given me second chances because last year my attendance was really bad. He wasn't going to let me on this year, and then he did. And now I'm sitting here with 100% attendance and 100% punctuality."*

*"At college, it's more subjective. It's not ticking boxes. You have to have development in your work and that gets you the marks."*

# EFFECTIVENESS BELOW #4

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## Visceral Image #22

This image depicts how some students fail to thrive in their school's intensive, battery-farming approach and start to do better when the pressure is off them.

**Students\*:**

**Starting topic:** being treated like an adult.

**Ending topic:** becoming an adult learner.

We *freak out* at *military* teachers who are *intense* and *overbearing*. We want to *change tack* from the *nightmare* of *ticking boxes* where facts are *crammed in* until they *build up* and you *drop* what you are *juggling* just to get it *off your plate* and end up *a write-off to society*.

We need a *chilled environment* to *take the space* and *recharge*, with some *leeway* to *step away* and get *space to breathe*. Just *step down* the pace and *long out* the lesson by *breaking it into chunks* and *pinpointing* facts. They *mesh* better when *broken up* for us, building a *strong foundation* so we can show our *true colours*.

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\*Students Group 9

# EFFECTIVENESS BELOW #5

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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.

**Students:**

*"If college has taught me anything, it's that adults really aren't that different."*

*"Going to college, you look up to people and then you start becoming one of them. You realise 'actually, we're in the same boat; I'm late and you're late'. That's a bit funny, isn't it."*

*"It's a maturity thing. People aren't actually looking at you. They are worried about themselves and whether people are looking at them."*

*"Some people can't find themselves until they hit a certain age."*

*"When you were younger, you think 'I can't wait to be an adult but, as you get older, you think 'why?'"*

*"When you are young you can't wait to grow up and then as soon as you hit 18 or 19, you're like 'oh crap'."*

*"You think 'when I'm an adult, I'm going to be this person and do that'. And then that doesn't happen; life takes you in weird directions. I'm all these different types of person."*

*"Part of being an adult is realising you don't have to be just this person. You can be professional and childish in different situations. What you think of as 'being an adult' changes over time."*

*"It's about relaxing – finding yourself comfortable. That might be growing up."*



# EFFECTIVENESS BELOW #6

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## Visceral Image #23

This image depicts the dawning reality for students that, with independence comes the responsibility to decide what they are going to do with their lives.

**Students\*:**

**Starting topic:** being treated like a grown-up.

**Ending topic:** being a grown-up.

College is a *mini advert in life* for us. If we *slack off*, a *grumpy old troll* will *clock* us, *hound* us and *pile on* the work. If we *put it on*, we *go forward* as *someone's puppet*. If we *bottle* it *up*, we stay *cooped up* and *pushed to* our *limits* until we *crack* into *bits and pieces*. If we *hit a certain age*, we might *buckle up*, *switch it around* and *knuckle down*.

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\*Students Group 3



O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

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# **LEADING BY LISTENING: REFLECTIVE LEARNING**

## **Paper 5: Presentation**

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SANDY HENDERSON, OPUS

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# LEADING BY LISTENING

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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

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**33**

\*OPUS – An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society Regd. Charity No. 282415 (see p.24)

# HOW IT WORKS

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- 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

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## *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 five: Presentation**. 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](http://www.fetl.org.uk).

# VISCERAL IMAGES

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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.

# THEME FIVE

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## Presentation

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

**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.



# PRESENTATION ABOVE #1

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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.

**Key words above: misunderstood, blame, pretence, communication**

## **Leaders:**

*"There are so many things imposed by people in DfE who have no understanding of what's going on."*

*"If you talk to our local politicians and local councils, they think very, very highly of us: they rate what we do; they know what we do. But that's not mirrored as you go further up; it gets lost."*

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

*"They just think we're a big school. A big sixth form. They have no concept of those challenges that we face every day with students."*

*"They've all studied PPE at Oxford: we may as well be speaking in Chinese; they just wouldn't understand."*

*"Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. We have a politician come in and it's all bells and whistles; we keep the place immaculately clean and clear out any students who might swear a little bit, because that's what we do and what everybody does."*

# PRESENTATION ABOVE #2

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## Visceral Image #24

This image depicts leadership as involving many unwanted and unpleasant tasks behind the apparent power and glamour of the role.

**Leaders\*:**

**Starting topic:** principals having to do work they might not choose.

**Ending topic:** students having to do jobs they might not choose.

We may appear *suited and booted under the spotlight* but, *turning around* from a *different angle*, there is a *bit of a shift*. We *struggle* to *wave a magic wand* or sprinkle *unicorn dust* yet we cannot *walk away* or *pass the buck* from what *surfaces* when we *dig into* the *nightmare parked at the door*.

*Pain* will *shoot in the foot* for anyone *riding the waves* when they *dip* onto a *hidden shallow* with *rocks up* on the *pathway*. Once the *unicorn effect* is *written off*, the only *get-out clause* is to *hang on* and inch *back to the centre*.

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\*Leaders Group 4

# PRESENTATION ABOVE #3

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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.

## **Leaders:**

*"Sometimes we are very good at beating each other up, perhaps to make ourselves feel better."*

*"It's really disappointing to see publications like FE Week with something awful on the front page every week. It seems almost to revel in disappointment."*

*"I do worry quite a lot about how people are vilified for not getting it right."*

*"When I look at what principals do, I look up and think 'do I really want that?'"*

*"I wouldn't want to be a person with a young child doing my job or any of these senior leadership type roles."*

*"I don't want us to be seen as the poor relations. We should be the last element that puts learners into employment."*

*"I see some really good people on the shop floor and think 'how can we get you there, because you've got all the skills and tools? Am I promoting myself or my job in a manner that makes it look appealing?'"*

*"The more we can celebrate leadership in the sector as being something that is not going to kill you, the better."*

# PRESENTATION ABOVE #4

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## Visceral Image #25

This image depicts leaders as shouldering the burden of responsibility for their college while being blamed and criticised by those below.

**Leaders\*:**

**Starting topic:** being stretched.

**Ending topic:** needing to decide priorities.

Our job is to resemble a *swan on the surface, flying ahead* to seek a *safe haven on the ground* when we *get a fog* and need to *become grounded* when in a *grey area*.

To get a *truer picture*, we *drill back* to look *behind the scenes* and discover we are in a *dumping ground*. Faced with *all that rubbish*, we have to *step up* and *pick things up* just to get *back to square one*. This leaves us *stretched* and *skeletal* as we seek *headspace* to *act outside the box* and *wrap things up* for others.

We reach *saturation point*, like an *absorbed sponge*; yet *things are skewed round* since, as we *battle on, under the cosh*, we *get it in the neck, beaten up* by others who *cry out*, wanting to be *spoon-fed*.

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\*Leaders Group 1

# PRESENTATION ABOVE #5

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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.

## **Leaders:**

*"I think it is fascinating that we never talk about it. We all sit there and generally put a rosy face on how it's going."*

*"Sometimes I don't believe in some of the things we're asked to do but we've got to do them."*

*"You put on a smile and you go out and do whatever you have to do, even if you don't feel like it."*

*"On the one hand, I'm very empathetic to people who are feeling under stress but, on the other hand, you've still got this institution to run and you feel like saying 'for God's sake, get back to work'."*

*"You've got to be upbeat on the outside and look like you got a lot of those things under control even if there are plates spinning in the background."*

*"That is how it is in FE – management is in its own virtual reality, quite disconnected from those on the ground."*

*"Some of the worst senior management talk about values and it's total emperor's new clothes."*

*"Management like to solve problems on paper so it looks like it's all sorted."*

# PRESENTATION ABOVE #6

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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.

## **Leaders:**

*"We can lose those things that actually help staff and students' wellbeing in our crisis moments and not think in the bigger picture."*

*"If you listen to management, they will say 'you shouldn't be doing anything at home'."*

*"Sometimes we spend an hour doing emails when, actually, a 5-minute conversation would clear up the mess."*

*"The other thing is not to use email so much for communication, and actually get out of your office and go and speak to someone."*

*"People start to get scared about how big the job is and how big the issues are and how big the solutions need to be."*

*"It's not about coming in and making big changes. This is about little things such as communication – saying good morning to staff, and touching in and stuff. That goes a long way with staff."*

*"Because that person who comes to you is not resilient enough or doesn't know what to do, sometimes you want to tell them to have a go, try it and then come to me. In your head, you are saying 'please let me get on with my job because, unless you do that, I won't be able to train you or tell you what to do or what the process is'."*

# PRESENTATION IN-BETWEEN #1

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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.

**Key words in-between: support, communication, needs**

***Support staff:***

*"You can see the difference in the students generally. They need more support in all sorts of areas of life."*

*"A lot of what we do as well as developing career skills is actually developing softer skills such as resilience and problem-solving and how to communicate face-to-face."*

*"What are the invisible skills we are teaching? Is it taking their hand and leading them everywhere, wiping their arse all the time?"*

*"We used to send letters. I got fed up of kids coming in with this letter, saying 'what does this letter say?'"*

*"We have 50% of students who need remedial English so how do we communicate with them? In writing."*

*"Some of them are spoon-fed in school and not taught to be resilient. They are latch-key kids with working parents putting them in childcare from 7am to 6.30pm."*

# PRESENTATION IN-BETWEEN #2

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## Visceral Image #26

This image depicts how support staff maintain a clear work-life separation in order to retain a professional outlook when dealing with problematic cases and, as far as possible, not bring work home emotionally.

**Support staff\*:**

**Starting topic:** role boundaries.

**Ending topic:** freedom in role.

I have *half a job* that is *front facing* and half that is *closeted away*. When *on the ground*, I keep a *finger on the pulse* to *pick up* when *pushy* people have *meltdowns*, look *a bit lost* or act *off the wall*.

I *know my limits* so I don't get *fleece*d or become *stagnant* when others are *flagged up* for *shouting*. This *string to my bow* means I don't let it *get on my nerves* or *bottle it up* and *dilute* my feelings. When I *cross over* the *boundaries* of work, I *switch off* with a *cup of tea* and *leave it at the door*.

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\*Support staff Group 3



# PRESENTATION IN-BETWEEN #3

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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).

## **Support staff:**

*"If we support them too much, they don't get educated."*

*"We have a huge pastoral support network in the college but they are not there to take the student out and chat to them for hours on end; they are there to get them back into the classroom."*

*"We get people who don't ask as nicely as they should."*

*"We've got students with mental health issues who can't come into college. Threats of suicide, self-harm and it's like we are setting our students up for a fall. I don't know where the blame lies for that. Can we cater for the students that are coming in with more and more high level of need?"*

*"In supported learning, you never know – what they may present when they come at interview or Welcome Day tends to not be anything like they are when they come."*

*"We get students coming to us, saying 'I haven't got any money for dinner'. We should have lessons about money management. They walk round and they have got their phones topped up, they have got a packet of fags but they've got no money for food because they know they can come to us and get money."*

# PRESENTATION IN-BETWEEN #4

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## Visceral Image #27

This image depicts the career dilemma for teachers: whether to persist with a job that involves less and less teaching, move upwards into management, or forestall the risk of redundancy by seeking a new career.

**Teachers\*:**

**Starting topic:** teaching staff leaving.

**Ending topic:** the replaceability of teaching staff.

Teachers *starting from scratch* may *turn up* expecting an *ivory tower* but, after *clocking up* some years, *plateau* and face *split pathways*. We may be *plucked* out for a *route upwards* that *leads on* into management – a *get-out-of-jail-free card* watching *downtrodden* colleagues *staggering* when *hit with a big stick*.

If that *route through the door* is *blocked*, we may *go backwards to go forwards* by *cherry picking* our duties as a *covering* for our *fumbling spots*. We can *pick up the tools on the ground* and *build up* a new career. Or we can *grasp* that we are *lumbered in a corner* and *missing a trick* by not joining the *outflow* seeking a new *outlet*.

Even if we are not *looking to step off down that road*, we are not *stuck with* a *fixed* destiny to *build around* and may be *moved over* through the *gateway*, so some of us have *stood up*, *walked up there* and *walked out that door*, to *the world*.

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\*Teachers Group 4

# PRESENTATION IN-BETWEEN #5

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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.

## **Teachers:**

*"Sometimes we feel more like social workers. It's getting more and more like this."*

*"Teachers want to teach; actually, we are also administrators, organisers, carers, counsellors, parents, naggers – all that sort of stuff."*

*"You're not just teaching the subject, you are teaching morals, how to behave, life skills, resilience, how to interact with other people and, particularly the last 10 years, just how to have conversations with each other."*

*"The types of student we get now are more needy and have been spoon-fed in school so, when they come to us, they don't have all those abilities. We have to teach them that as well as their subjects."*

*"The kids come in; they can't come on time; they have no basic communication skills. That's why we are social workers."*

*"We have to be social worker, counsellor, surrogate, parent – all of these roles – but there is absolutely no thought around training teaching staff to do that."*

*"The level of need that students have is beyond what people are used to."*

*"The amount of students I have that are requiring support can be 60% of my classroom population."*

# PRESENTATION BELOW #1

---

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.

Key words below: life skills, support, communication

## **Students:**

*"A lot of children going in to school now get a book and start trying to swipe across it, to scan it because their parents don't read books with them."*

*"Most of the GCSE English students are non-readers; they can read but they are non-readers. What is now coined as cultural capital is now very limited for them."*

*"Often the reason why the learners can't do the Maths exams is because they can't understand the English in the question. They can't extract the Maths from the question."*

*"Even though everything is laid out for them, they can't do it. I think a lot of that is their confidence."*

*"We are being told to do homework, but then we don't have like a format or a structure. We aren't being taught how to do it."*

*"On our course, we've just been told 'make sure you don't get anything on your hands.' There are wash stations but we haven't been told exactly what to do."*

# PRESENTATION BELOW #2

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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.

## **Students:**

*"I don't know what's happened but something has happened where the doctors are diagnosing ADHD, KDHD, YDHD... there is so much of it."*

*"There is a name or abbreviation for everything. When I was at school, you got told that you were shit. You weren't given leeway for anything."*

*"It's not new, this mental health thing; we are just better at identifying it now, and I agree it is ratcheted up by social media too."*

*"Most people here are just ordinary, normal kids having normal stuff. They have normal lives; they do the course and then they move on to wherever and they don't have any big problems or dramas or crises. And we never see them. So, 5% of your team who are not like that is going to absorb about 90% of your time, and the rest just have to get on with it."*

*"There is no expectation that they will work for anything; the parent will give it to them or they think they will just get it somehow. The drive to get a job to get the things you want isn't there for a lot of people."*

*"You've got some students coming in that is pointless – I'm sorry to say it, but it is. It is pointless them being here because they are not learning."*

*"We are dealing with students coming from specialist provision and we are throwing them from the frying pan into the fire and not supporting their needs."*

*"We are becoming a special school now."*

# PRESENTATION BELOW #3

---

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.

**Students:**

*"I also think students should have a section of a lesson on how to speak to people."*

*"I've been teaching for about 5 or 6 years, and each year I've noticed there's been a drop, a lack of common sense – and you can't really teach common sense – but a lack of general understanding about things like telling the time."*

*"Students come in with so many needs; they are partly disabled in terms of their social skills."*

*"They need life experience going to places, learning how to be around people, saying 'please' and 'thank you'."*

*"They grunt. There's no 'please', there's no 'thank you'."*

*"They don't know how to speak because of their phones."*

*"I don't think it's necessarily the phones that are the issue. It's whether or not the student respects the teacher enough to listen to them."*

# PRESENTATION BELOW #4

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## Visceral Image #28

This image depicts the student experience of freezing under pressure, notably during exams but also when talking to adults.

**Students\*:**

**Starting topic:** not wishing to repeat an earlier conversation.

**Ending topic:** not being able to recall what they know under pressure.

We are *dragged on* to campus to *make that step* to *open new doors*, drawn into *the spotlight* by a *college broadcast* that is *hyped up* and a *bit fishy*.

Our search for *filler* conversation is *hit and miss*. We *go blank* and have *no brain*. We are *knocked off* guard and *lost for something to say*. When *put on the spot*, we go *up the walls*.

Words are *draining* away and then it *went dark*.

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\*Students Group 1



O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

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# **LEADING BY LISTENING: REFLECTIVE LEARNING**

**Paper 6: Community**

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**SANDY HENDERSON, OPUS**

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# LEADING BY LISTENING

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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\*.

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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

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**33**

\*OPUS – An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society Regd. Charity No. 282415 (see p.23)

# HOW IT WORKS

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

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# SEVEN THEMES

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## *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 six: Community**. 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](http://www.fetl.org.uk).

# VISCERAL IMAGES

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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.

# THEME SIX

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## Community

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

Colleges aim to provide students with an environment in which they feel safe and welcome to be themselves and, through 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.

# COMMUNITY ABOVE #1

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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.

**Key words above: goodwill, teamwork, collaboration**

**Leaders:**

*"That community bit is important, isn't it?"*

*"The whole sector is run on goodwill. Because you don't go in it for the money or for anything else."*

*"It is so critical for your organisation that we look after each other."*

*"If we lost goodwill in FE, we'd be in serious trouble."*

*"It doesn't matter what level you are: you'll still pick up a piece of litter if someone has dropped it. Whatever level you are working, you will chat to the students, help somebody up to the lift or up the stairs."*

*"If we don't look after our people, our brand doesn't exist any more."*

*"You need that humility to put people first and, if you do, you will muddle your way through because they will put up with things for you."*

*"What I've noticed here is that it's a team effort and everyone is involved in the decision."*

*"That is the downside that we have our courses and we don't mix at all unless you know people from out of college."*

# COMMUNITY ABOVE #2

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## Visceral Image #29

This image depicts leadership as requiring constant vigilance in all directions and a willingness to step in and troubleshoot whatever situations emerge.

**Leaders\*:**

**Starting topic:** dealing with external pressures.

**Ending topic:** dealing with internal pressures.

With a *birds-eye view*, we *rule the world* by *looking through my lens* to *have a handle on* everything. We can see what is *on an even keel* and where there are *cracks beginning to show*. If someone is *finding his feet*, we can *keep an eye on them* to ensure they are *bedding down*.

If you are *stretched* or starting *to crack*, we can *dive in* and do some *troubleshooting* before you *break apart* or go into a *downward spiral*. *With my hat on* for *firefighting*, we can enter *the battle* to *absorb heat* away from your *bare bones* so you can *step back*. If you *flag up pinchpoints*, we can *draw a line* and *juggle* resources so you *have space* to reach *a comfort zone*.

We are a *filter* who can *pick up bags of rubbish*. If work becomes *a beast*, we will *embrace that* signal to put *jam in the sandwich* and win your *hearts and minds*. Staying *on the bus* means we may *swerve* but must be *geared towards hanging on*.

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\* Leaders Group 6



# COMMUNITY ABOVE #3

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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.

**Leaders:**

*"It's interesting to say that the college is a business. It used to be a family."*

*"Being dynamic and being flexible is part of the sector."*

*"Colleges work best by just being in touch with the local needs."*

*"We welcome everybody but we offer them different solutions to what they need. That's one of our great strengths."*

*"It really doesn't matter the size of the college, the grade of the college, the finance of the college. It doesn't matter the make-up of the college; everybody seems to have the same worries. Everyone has the same concerns. Everyone feels the same."*

*"As a sector, we need to be brave enough not to start fighting each other."*

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

*"I see people starting in new roles and saying 'I didn't realise how big the role was' and this is from teachers, trainer assessors, administrative staff right the way through to senior management – you used to have two people doing a role where now you have only one."*

# COMMUNITY ABOVE #4

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## Visceral Image #30

This image depicts leadership as an extreme 'winner takes all' rollercoaster which requires extreme resilience and single-mindedness to survive and pits colleges against each other in the race for student numbers, courses and funding.

**Leaders\*:**

**Starting topic: the pleasures of the job.**

**Ending topic: matching supply to demand.**

Staying *ahead of the game* requires you to *get out of bed*, *scrabble over* the competitive *landscape* and *run as fast as you can* through the *entrance doors*. The ones with the *drive* to *scrap* will be a *tough nut to crack*.

Don't let your *balance shift* when you *turn left*, *jump up and down* or get *turned around* on this *rollercoaster*. Those who *stand still* will *fall down* and get their *heads lopped off*. Anyone whose *baggage* causes them *distress* will come *off the rails* and *implode* in a *mind-blowing whirlwind* of *muddle* and *mess*.

The *proof of the pudding* is in the *single voice shooting* for *extra plates on the table*. *Imposters* may *shout* with *louder voices* but will have their *forked tongue ripped out* and any *horns growing* will *fracture* and *fall off*.

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\*Leaders Group 5

# COMMUNITY IN-BETWEEN #1

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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.

**Key words in-between: impact, investment, caring, effort**

***Support staff:***

*"All the people at the bottom are keeping this place together."*

*"Somebody just said to me the other day 'well, it's only business' and I thought 'that's where you're wrong'."*

*"That's how it should be – everyone supporting everyone."*

*"That's why we are good at the wellbeing and turning people's lives around. Because we do form a community. I've had students - and I'm sure you have – where they write to you and say 'this is the first time I felt really at home in a school education and I felt valued'."*

*"You don't see people saying 'that's not part of my role'. That helps us hand on a 'can-do' attitude to the students."*

*"Other people function differently to you and you get more out of your staff if you value that."*

*"In some areas you get 'well that's your problem'."*

# COMMUNITY IN-BETWEEN #2

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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.

## **Support staff:**

*"It's not as happy as it was when I first started here."*

*"So much still depends upon personal relationships: who you know; who you trust; who you think is reliable; who you recognise is not; who will actually do something; who thinks that saying something is the equivalent of doing it."*

*"People are very edgy; people are thinking that their jobs are going to change, being much more fearful around the future, and that's translating in their role."*

*"Every Easter, we are waiting for redundancies as legally they have to give 3 months' notice so we are always wondering subconsciously 'how we have done this year?'"*

*"Morale plummets because staff feel threatened or feel insecure."*

*"The people who are getting up and retiring or leaving, are women, ethnic minorities. So, it's leaving a very white, male workforce again."*

*"Peer support and things like that – I just think that's getting written off."*

*"We work in silos now."*

# COMMUNITY IN-BETWEEN #3

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## Visceral Image #31

This image depicts the variety of issues that students bring with them to college, and the versatility required of support staff to deal with them all.

**Support Staff\*:**

**Starting topic: the excellence of internal support.**

**Ending topic: the excellence of external support.**

Like actors *treading the boards*, we *mirror mainstream* society: *in tune* with those who *play up*; a *sounding board* to those who *sound off*; *hanging on* to those who *stretch out the window*; *talking round* those *in their own world*; creating a *level playing field* for those who find it *tipped* at *different angles*; *lifting out* anyone who *falls into* the *gaps*; and *popping on* a *fresh blanket* if someone's life *cycle* goes *stale*.

We won't *sit on our hands* or *second guess* where habits have *hardened* or *hit a point* that could *go both ways*. We offer *the full shebang* to make a problem *disappear*, *putting it in a box* and *locking it off* confidentially. We are *tied to* our students, working *seamlessly* to never *miss a trick*.

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\*Support staff Group 4

# COMMUNITY IN-BETWEEN #4

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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 for class.

## **Teachers:**

*"It's not the kind of job you can just do and go home and forget about. We are all here for a reason."*

*"Our work changes lives. It's a real opportunity to connect with people and say 'give us a go and promise me you'll do your best and you're on'."*

*"When it's all awful, you can go into the classroom and remember why you put up with all that rubbish."*

*"You can see the impact you have: the difference that either you can have personally or that the organisation can make to people's lives."*

*"That's why we come here: we want to teach what we know to students."*

*"They will think that, if they've got your lesson plan, they can get someone else to do your lesson."*

*"She doesn't teach – she will look through a PowerPoint and then, that's it. You're done. Get on with it."*

*"The lessons aren't very planned out. It's like 'let's find something from this pile'."*

*"We just have a real inconsistency with our tutors."*

# COMMUNITY IN-BETWEEN #5

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## Visceral Image #32

This image depicts the way lack of time has made teachers' classes resemble their experience of training: a sham process of going through the motions to tick a box rather than achieve actual learning.

**Teachers\*:**

**Starting topic: the inadequacy of teaching.**

**Ending topic: the inadequacy of training.**

We *click through* a presentation to *tick a box* and *hand it* in rather than *doubling up* to *jump back and forward* between the *needy* and those who are *flying*. If students *moan* or are *fussed about* something, we *weigh up* whether to *wing it*.

*Playing it safe* avoids *hassle*: it *falls on* us to *ram it home across the board* using a *blanket* approach, *bringing in front-loaded* information allowing no *leeway* to *drop back* to *pick up* the *mixed up* and put them *on the same foot*.

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\*Teachers Group 3

# COMMUNITY IN-BETWEEN #6

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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.

## **Teachers:**

*"You can tell when a teacher doesn't care. They don't put no effort into you; they will just give you the work and tell you 'do that; do this' and just leave you."*

*"The way I notice if a teacher cares or not is the way they talk to you."*

*"The head of the course came in and told us 'this is a very difficult course but, if you lads are serious and I see after ten weeks you are taking it serious, I will take off time from myself to open the classroom for you to come in and do extra work'. And he actually did that throughout the whole year."*

*"He even gave us books that we needed for exams that he paid for from his own pocket and made sure we got them. This is the kind of teachers that education needs: teachers who care about their students and want to see a better future for others in life."*

*"If you are not putting the effort in, the teachers say 'why should we put the effort into you?'. That's how I see it. 'There are people on the waiting list to get into the college, and you are just wasting my time not going to lessons.' That gets through."*

*"If they have put more effort in, so I do I. If they are trying to make me pass – they want me to pass and are trying to push me, I am going to have to put more effort into what I am doing."*

*"We used to see the students outside of the course in the lunchtimes and in the breaks but there is not the same slack in the system any more. Even then, there was only 55% retention but we were proud of that."*



# COMMUNITY BELOW #1

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The value of college as a family is most acute for the students whose own family lives are unstable or 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.

**Key words below: safety, personalised, listening**

**Students:**

*"It's somewhere where they are wanted every day and they know what is coming. It's safe."*

*"There are a lot of students here who are very frightened to not be here anymore. That's why they are still here. And we've got to inspire them to get a job but actually the workplace can be even better than this. But this is all they know. It's a blanket."*

*"We are always focusing on the negative, not the bigger picture of what you are trying to do and how you are making a difference. Even if it's just keeping a kid out of going back to his home, that's a good thing."*

*"Sometimes we keep people here because it's the only safe place for them. Friday afternoon and they all go into crisis because they've got nowhere to go and this is their home; this is their safe space; this is their community."*

*"Most people don't go out now because they are afraid of how society is. You've got gang violence, getting robbed, people carrying knives."*

*"There's a lot of gang violence. I know a lot of kids from this college live in places where they are literally afraid to go home."*

*"That is the downside that we have our courses and we don't mix at all unless you know people from out of college."*

# COMMUNITY BELOW #2

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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.

**Students:**

*"Every aspect of college is personal, be it now or your future."*

*"And they have got someone to talk to every day. They have got the relationships. And they get something to eat and drink. It's back to the basics again. It's a community."*

*"It's a smaller community and it's more personalised to how you learn."*

*"The other class has got a WhatsApp group for assignments and stuff and it's become a kind of counselling group for everyone who's struggling a little bit."*

*"To students, it's really important that they're known by somebody."*

*"Yes, it's nice to feel that you are actually being listened to."*

*"More people to speak to is never a bad thing."*

*"If you are having a bad day at college, the teacher would listen to you more. At sixth form, you have to be that perfect little student every day."*

# COMMUNITY BELOW #3

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## Visceral Image #33

This image depicts student difficulties staying focused in class, and the help they need to recover from setbacks and re-engage with lessons.

**Students\*:**

**Starting topic:** benefiting from learning enrichment support.

**Ending topic:** benefiting from behaviour support.

Learning has *ups and downs*. Teachers can *get on to you* and *push you* with *rubbish about* staying *on this path* until you *mess up*. Then, we become a *class of zombies* staring *out the window* because a *bunch of words* won't *stick in my brain* and it is *downhill from there*: we *sink into* despair or *have a blow-up* and get *kicked out*.

Others give us *deep help*: they *don't sugar-coat it*, offer *no rainbows and sunshine, no plate of gold*. They *pull me in* and help me *click onto* the lesson so I can *step up* and *figure out* how to *pull it together*.

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\*Students Group 8



O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

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# **LEADING BY LISTENING: REFLECTIVE LEARNING**

Paper 7: Wellbeing

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SANDY HENDERSON, OPUS

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# LEADING BY LISTENING

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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.

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## *Engagement with purpose*

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- 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 seven: Wellbeing**. Excerpts from the transcripts are reproduced to show how the views expressed about wellbeing in the 33 Listening Posts reflect aspects of the first six themes. Full transcripts are available at [www.fetl.org.uk](http://www.fetl.org.uk).

# THEME SEVEN

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## Wellbeing

*“We are just like the students really – we are just not switching off anymore.”*

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 PRIORITIES #1

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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.

**Key words: switching off**

*"Even if you don't physically take it home, then you do mentally."*

*"My pay doesn't reflect the emotional ties that I have to take home sometimes."*

*"I take work home emotionally. I might not take a piece of work home to mark but I know, last year, definitely I took 4 or 5 children home with me."*

*"Not lying awake at night worrying about what you have to do next day. That would be good."*

*"They are good at catering for the people who are having the time off but not those who are covering."*

*"At the gates, I can switch off. I have a good healthy social life and home life and I don't allow it to creep in."*

# WELLBEING PRIORITIES #2

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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.

**Key word: compartmentalising**

*"Take five minutes and sit in silence."*

*"If you are having a bad time and you've got somewhere to go like that where you can just get away and have some silence and zone out, then, maybe, 15 minutes later, you can get up and go back to class."*

*"Sometimes you need your personal space, to be on your own."*

*"Retreat into a safe place."*

*"You just compartmentalise."*

*"I meditate and it's gone. Or I put it in a box and think 'I will deal with that tomorrow'."*

*"Just knowing you have the chance to take the space reduces your stress."*

# WELLBEING COMPLIANCE #1

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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.

**Key word: pretence**

*"There are posters up round the college saying they look after you but I don't think they do, really."*

*"Stress can help us perform to our best so I don't think we should think of that as necessarily a negative."*

*"Did anyone go to the wellbeing workshop? I didn't have time."*

*"They were told they can't go to these welfare groups and say they haven't got enough admin time, or they can't do this; we have to go to it and be positive. So, we don't go any more."*

# WELLBEING COMPLIANCE #2

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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.

**Key word: personalised**

*"Everyone's idea of wellbeing sits in a different place. A plant doesn't do it for me."*

*"[Wellbeing]'s not something the college can just decide. Someone may say they do like to get a fruit tea from the wellbeing box, whereas other people think 'no thank you'. There is no one-for-all fix."*

*"There was an email come around that was telling us to go and talk to a tree or stroke a plant. Is it really viable?"*

*"It is obviously well meaning to set up these happiness stations. People do look at the books and I think it's great if it helps those who are receptive to that. But I derive my happiness differently."*

*"This is getting ridiculous. We are running out of resources and you're buying plants and salt lamps."*

# WELLBEING CAPACITY #1

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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.

**Key word: headspace**

*"We haven't got time to do the wellbeing because we haven't got time to do anything else."*

*"I think we are helping students but only by putting in extra hours, being flexible, overcoming problems but these problems are not stressing them, they are stressing us."*

*"The bottom line is I am expected to do more for less and that threatens their wellbeing."*

*"Every day we're making decisions that potentially threaten wellbeing as a result of the capacity, the stretch that we've got."*

# WELLBEING CAPACITY #2

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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.

**Key word: limits**

*"We can't keep going at that speed. You're right. We now spend more time reflecting, talking, exploring, which is really important."*

*"I think I know my limits. If I find I'm getting too stressed, I'll just go to my line manager about things. And not just bottle it up."*

*"I come out of here sometimes and I've cried my eyes out here before I've even got home because I need to get it out."*

*"I do other things that take my focus completely away but I do, at the end of the day, have to write a list of what I need to do tomorrow, lock it off and then carry on."*

*"You can't manage those things if you are tired; everything gets worse."*

# WELLBEING EFFECTIVENESS #1

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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.

**Key word: self-knowledge**

*"You get better at picking up the warning signs and what works for you."*

*"You get more resilient the more you do it."*

*"Some will feel better for getting that piece of work out the way; others need a break."*

*"It's really important that, when you do go home, you do do something for yourself. If you don't look after yourself, you can't help others."*

*"I know the resources I need to help me. They may not help anybody else."*

*"Unknowingly, I am better at managing stress because I've learnt how to time manage and become more independent and, in doing so, learnt how to control stress."*



# WELLBEING EFFECTIVENESS #2

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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.

**Key words: coping strategies**

*"Some people do yoga; others go for a run. I can't think of anything worse, personally. I would rather sit and watch a bit of TV."*

*"I love my plants; I love my garden."*

*"I run. The drive home helps."*

*"Dog walks, family time, fresh air."*

*"I go to the gym."*

*"Get yourself a puppy."*

*"Go for a long walk."*

*"I watch children's programmes with my kids."*

*"You develop a really dark sense of humour."*

*"Alcohol."*

*"Chocolate."*

# WELLBEING PRESENTATION #1

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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.

**Key word: self-soothing**

*"I may seem like a confident person but the things I have been through, it wasn't helpful that I had to bottle it up and deal with it by myself."*

*"I chat to my parents but I don't tell them anything."*

*"I think it's more about expectations than pressure. If you've got parents with high expectations who want you to get really good grades, that can be bad."*

*"You are just scared. That is it. You haven't got anxiety. That is a different feeling. We all have that."*

*"We all have anxiety, it's a modern-day thing – but is it really anxiety? You're not allowed to say that but they're using that card."*

*"The advice I would give to myself is to smile, keep smiling because it doesn't hurt to smile."*

# WELLBEING COMMUNITY #1

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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.

**Key word: load-sharing**

*"On the way home, we used to ramble about work and get it out of our system."*

*"We joke – I think that's what gets us through the day."*

*"I work closely with someone; we are good pals, and we make sure we have a coffee together every day or a bit of fresh air or something together."*

*"Everybody needs that time to be able to just say 'How has your day been? What are you going to be doing this weekend?'"*

*"When our senior team gets really down, I say 'come on, let's go for a walk around'."*

*"I talk when I need to. And I still have hissy fits. I say it how it is. But if I couldn't do that, I don't know."*

# WELLBEING COMMUNITY #2

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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.

**Key word: acknowledgement**

*"We feel the burden as much as the people we look after; and being able to talk about it, I think, is vital."*

*"If you know about other people's issues, they will be more approachable. You can live what they've been through."*

*"My mantra to the staff is 'just talk to me' because, if I don't know about it, I can't help you."*

*"We will go out for a fag or take time out – take a walk for a couple of minutes. If your head is a bit fuzzy today, they will understand that."*

*"It's good to talk in the classroom about our personal issues and what we've been through. BBC Bitesize: I don't care!"*

# WELLBEING: RELIABILITY OVER EXCELLENCE

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## *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.

**Sandy Henderson, OPUS**





An Organisation for Promoting  
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**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.

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# ABOUT FETL

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**The Further Education Trust for Leadership's vision is of a further education sector that is valued and respected for:**

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

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