

Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered

Emotional responses to the White Paper

Much has been written over recent weeks about the FE and skills sector's reaction to the government's new skills White Paper 'Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth'. There are those that have waxed lyrical about the new role and position of colleges, whilst others have written of missed opportunities and damp squibs. However, in this contribution to the discussion around the new White Paper, I have taken the opportunity to reflect on the three distinct phases of my emotional reactions to the White Paper, starting with all the hype, hope and rhetoric back in 2020.

For me it all started last year when HM Government, in response to effective lobbying and positioning, began to make promises of a bright new future for colleges and the wider FE and Skills sector. We were becoming recognised as a previously overlooked but now very much cherished part of the national education system, we even had an uplift in funding for 16- to 18-year-olds and an emerging narrative about a new future of sunlit uplands where technical and professional education for young people and adults would be put on the same footing as university degrees, and new initiatives for FE would not simply tinker but genuinely reform. A revolution was promised and there was a recognition that colleges could actually be part of the solution to rebuilding a post-Pandemic world. In his speech to the Social Market Foundation in July 2020 the Secretary of State said: *"If you want to transform many of our left-behind towns and regions, you don't do it by investing more money solely in universities. You invest in the local college – the beating hearts of so many of our towns."* During the same period, we also had the outputs of the Commission for the College of the Future emerging, producing some fascinating and impressive findings and suggestions and making an incredibly strong case for a new, strengthened role for colleges as anchor institutions and touchpoints for everyone in communities.

I was bewitched. Listening to the noise and the promise of a revolutionary White Paper with an abundance of opportunity and a new role for colleges at the heart of productivity and prosperity made me say out loud *"finally, our time has come"*. We were on the verge of a genuine lifelong learning strategy, we would see record levels of investment, and government were finally acknowledging the broader contributions that colleges were making to communities - the adaptive layer of the system that transforms and saves lives. We've arrived! I was bewitched, the spell had worked, I had been taken over by the luminosity of intent.

But in fairness to myself maybe I was obsessing too much about the promise of a new future. I was too hopeful that the sector had finally come of age in the eyes of government. Although in my defence I think the build up to the publication of the White Paper was something that we have not experienced before.

And then I became bothered. Things went quiet for us and obviously the attention of HM government rightly fell on all matters Covid-19 and the economic position of the country sharply declined. How could a revolution be funded when the Chancellor could not commit to any medium-term spending plans? How could we as a sector make a case for meaningful increases in funding against a backdrop of significant rises in unemployment, a reduction in tax receipts for the treasury and the need to address the previously unseen levels of government borrowing. This couldn't play out well for us. There were of course some glimmers of hope. The Commission for the College of the Future published a compelling vision for the future of a strengthened and valued college sector, regulators became more empathetic towards providers, 16-18 enrolment did not crash. All reasons to be cheerful. But I could not shift this sense of being bothered because there were so many reasons to be careful. What also added to this sense of being bothered was the delay in the publication of the White Paper – a postponed revolution, how does that work?

Then it arrived, it landed on our desks, the wait was over and now I'm bewildered. On reading Gavin's foreword I'm thinking "wow!". Never before have I seen such bold statements as "*this country has not always shown further education the esteem it deserves, with too many people – and too many employers – wrongly believing that studying for a degree at university is the only worthwhile marker of success..... a college course or apprenticeship can offer better outcomes.*" This is going to be good I thought, they've come good, the treasury has opened its wallet. But as I read on my sense of bewilderment grows. Firstly, what I am reading is very much in line with what I've read before. Where is the revolution promised by Gavin and Gillian? In fact, in my bewildered state, I googled *Raising Skills Improving Life Chances* – remember that? The chapters in that 2006 government statement of intent about the FE sector were focused around a system that meets the needs of employers, a national strategy for teaching and learning, a framework which spreads success and eliminates failure and a new relationship with colleges and providers. What I am reading now is a Post 18 strategy that very much overlooks the vital role colleges play in delivering education and training to 16–18-year-olds, and reads as if the sector hasn't twigged that employers are central to skills. I'm reading 80 pages with more than 30 policy decisions that arguably don't move the sector any further forward.

I'm also bewildered by the potential some of the proposals have to over complicate local and regional arrangements with the introduction of Local Skills Improvement Plans. What do the folks in LEPs and Combined Authorities who have been working with providers to formulate skills plans think about this? Will we soon have a new layer of planning where we have to get involved with Chambers of Commerce to develop another plan in addition to the employment, economy and skills plans of our local authorities? Have any of the policy wonks in the DFE actually worked closely with Chambers of Commerce – my local Chamber, great people that they are, are mostly concerned with parking, business rates and tourism. Did they, the Chambers, really ask for this? And of course, how does this all work in the context of devolution? I am also yet to meet an employer who really wants to be at the centre of the skills system and to have a decision-making role.

The state of bewilderment continues when I start listening to sector voices where the White Paper is generally well received and comes in for a fair bit of credit. But then it dawns on me - has the sector actually pulled off a quiet coup? Revolutions you see cause great pain, disruption and instability and nobody wants or needs any of these things right now. It may be that the

campaigning and positioning has produced a result which enables the best of the sector to continue to evolve and for colleges and providers to focus on implementing the well thought out strategies and plans they have been developing over recent years.

So maybe now I have entered my fourth state – admiration. Not for the government or its white paper, but for the sector in pulling off its own quiet revolution. Finally, we get government to acknowledge our position and value, they leave us alone to evolve without intrusive interference and we shape our own blue print for the future. Perhaps that's what is really going on.

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