FURTHER EDUCATION
TRUST FOR LEADERSHIP

BLOG

You say you want a revolution. Well, erm…

It is difficult to read the new, long-awaited white paper on further education without a sense of déjà vu. We have been here before but let's see if we have at least learned from past failures, writes **Dame Ruth Silver**.

Education secretary Gavin Williamson promised a 'revolution' in his new white paper. No doubt, given the challenges we face – from the economic impact of the pandemic to the long-term workforce implications of Brexit, not to mention the climate of extreme financial constraint in which further education has been obliged to operate for the past decade – a revolution is precisely what we need. Sadly, for all the huff and puff that preceded it, Mr Williamson's *Skills for jobs white paper* does not deliver policy likely to blow anyone's house down.

Of all the takes – hot and cold (and we have seen both, from the warm welcome given it by the Association of Colleges to the distinctly chilly response from unions and adult education organisations) – that I have read, I felt Professor Andy Westwood's was particularly acute and to the point. While many of the proposed interventions in the White Paper are welcome, even potentially transformative, he wrote, its big problem is that it seems to be have been written 'in a vacuum', lacking either knowledgeable reach into the recent history of sector reform, succinctly summarised in a recent FETL publication, or relevant grasp of policy in other relevant sectors and systems.

Despite these faults, to which I will return, I prefer to begin with the positives. There are some reasons to be cheerful here and we should acknowledge them.

First, it is very good to see a white paper that, in Sally Dicketts' words, recognises 'the important role we undoubtedly play in achieving social mobility, greater equality and diversity and enabling economic growth and recovery'. It is also great to see some flesh finally being put on the bones of the government's highly opaque 'levelling up' agenda, and for FE and skills to be located centrally in all of this, but it remains to be seen whether the warm words will be reflected in increased resource.

Some of the individual interventions are also worth welcoming. The strong focus on supporting learners into employment is a positive. Though not the whole story, this is key to social inclusion and to giving people choice and agency in managing their own lives. Lifelong learning loans (the 'flexible lifetime guarantee') for anyone without a qualification at Level 3 are long overdue and address a real need. There is also welcome acknowledgement of the challenge of improving the

basic skills of the population. What is missing, however, is any clear policy or strategy to get people currently the furthest distance from educational opportunity up the ladder to Level 2 and beyond. For a paper that aims to 'level up', this is a pretty serious omission.

But for all these modest claims on our optimism, there are more reasons to be careful than cheerful.

My first concern is with the lack of systemic thinking in the paper. Sure, there is a welcome attempt to join up local skills provision and demand through 'local skills improvement plans', though, as Andy Westwood also notes, there is not enough on how the new plans will articulate with the existing infrastructure of devolution, or on how chambers of commerce will fulfil their new role. Just as fundamentally, though, there is not enough on how these reforms will link to the reform agenda in other parts of the education system: universities, schools and adult and community education. This lack of join up has been a major fault in policy thinking for years and continues to be so, despite the unfulfilled promise of the Augar report.

My second main concern is with the employer-centric nature of the white paper. It aims to put 'employers at the heart of post-16 skills', and to give them a key role in developing 'local skills improvement plans' that meet labour market need. This kind of rhetoric is all too familiar from past papers on further education, going back to NCVQ, Leitch and beyond. The key question, of how to increase employer engagement and investment in staff development and training, is not answered, unfortunately.

It was difficult enough to secure this in happier times, but with so many employers rightly preoccupied with closure, redundancy and bankruptcy, not to mention Brexit, putting them in charge seems preposterously ambitious. Employment should be in the driving seat, for sure. But I am not convinced that putting employers in the driving seat is the best or most appropriate way to do it. The proper task of employers is but to make a profit and take care of their workers. Asking them also to take a lead in designing curriculum/provision seems, in these times, a bit of a stretch.

Third, while the focus on jobs is welcome, there is far too little on other aspects of social inclusion. Where is the recognition of learning's wider benefits? Where is the acknowledgement that further education students also need to learn to become active citizens, to think critically, to be creative, caring and resilient members of society? We need a radical approach to restore this kind of wider learning, so crucial to making well-rounded citizens capable of leading happy, fulfilled lives. Overall, there is far too little about what learners want or need. Further education students, alone among leaners, are denied this kind of wider option and agency.

Finally, the successful implementation of these reforms depends on a significant amount of learning from past missteps that I fear is simply not there. Certainly, it is not reflected in the paper. Why would we expect employers to engage fully in implementing these reforms when past experience suggests they lack both the interest and the capacity? What did we learn from Train 2 Gain, for example, that we are bringing into play this time around to ensure a better outcome? Are we any closer to understanding why they have not risen to this challenge before?

There is a troubling lack of learning too when it comes to other recent government reforms, notably with respect of devolution. How do these reforms fit with what is already in place? How will areas of apparent duplication be addressed? How will the Department for Education work across government departments to deliver a joined-up agenda that is also meaningful at a local level? How do we ensure the local plans and skills boards do not create skills ghettos, with wider access but narrower opportunity for students? There are no answers to these questions because it simply does not seem to have occurred to ministers to ask them.

One of the main tests of these reforms is still to come. Is the government prepared to invest in this agenda and, just as fundamentally, to reverse the swingeing cuts to further education of the past two decades? This will be crucial in empowering further education and skills to realize its potential contribution to the economic and social challenges we face. But, as the above considerations also make clear, lack of funding is not the only reason policies fail, and we need to address these failings too. The question I would most like to be answered by government is why we expect to succeed here where we have failed so often in the past. Until we can answer this question, talk of revolutions will have to wait.

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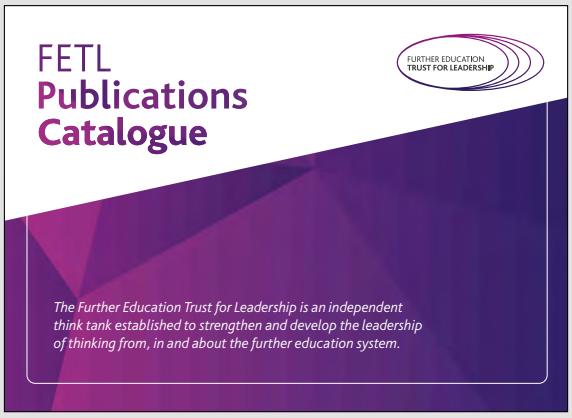

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