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Leadership challenges

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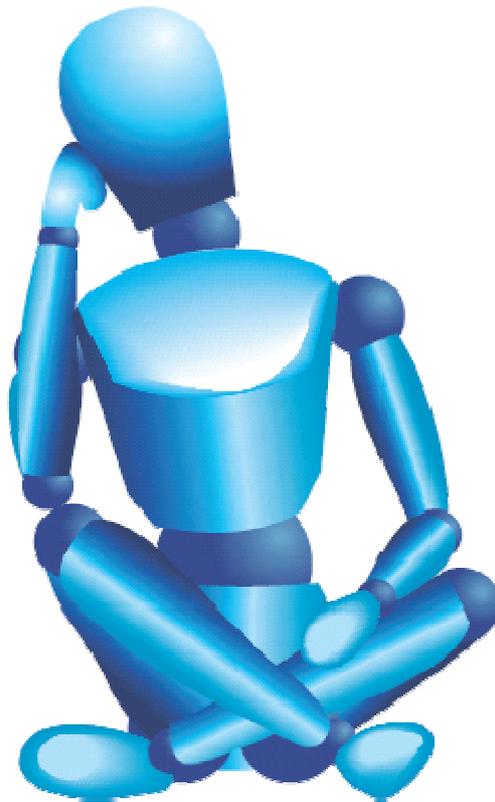
Leadership Challenges

Margaret Collinson and Professor David Collinson

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INTRODUCTION

> *"I was told that the problem for us is that people above us say 'F.E. takes anybody'. This is stated as a negative. I said I am proud to say that 'we take everybody'. Our message to the community is, 'come to us and we will help you reach your potential'."*

The previous working paper, (Leader-Led Relations in Context), emphasised the importance of context for understanding leader-led relations in the UK post-16 education sector. It also outlined some initial findings about the widely perceived significance of leadership in the sector and the broadly preferred leadership style based on consultation. **One of the most enlightening findings of our research to date is the extent of staff morale, commitment, dedication and professionalism. Given that the U.K. government saw leadership in the sector as problematic, we had expected to encounter a demoralised and passive workforce. But far from it, we have repeatedly interviewed staff at various hierarchical levels who are highly committed to 'making a difference' and to enhancing the learning and social benefits for students in the sector.**

Yet, despite these positive findings, we have also discovered a number of key, frequently interwoven 'leadership challenges' for the post-16 sector. These relate to the issues of power, distance and inequality discussed earlier and are now elaborated below. This second working paper seeks to highlight some of the issues that impact negatively on leadership within the sector generally and on staff, students and institutions more specifically. First, it explores the impact of intensified monitoring and auditing on post-16 leadership and leader-led relations. Second, it examines several issues related to inequality (for both students and FE Colleges) that constitute significant 'leadership challenges' and barriers to effective leader-led relations. Third, this paper offers specific recommendations that we are beginning to feed back into the sector based on the foregoing preliminary empirical analysis.

FROM COMMUNITY TO COMMERCIALISM

The nature and extent of government monitoring of the whole U.K. education sector has intensified in recent years. This has produced a very turbulent working environment in which change has become a constant reality (Leithwood et al 1999). Within the educational literature there is a growing recognition of the need for leaders in education to cope with change, complexity and paradoxical reform initiatives (Day et al 2000). Within the FE sector, this change represents a broad shift from 'community' to 'commercialism'.

In recent years the post-16 sector has seen the introduction of a 'new managerial' culture characterised by much greater attention to performance monitoring and standardized targets, increased competition between institutions and the general encouragement of a much more entrepreneurial way of organising post-16 education. Issues around financial and behavioural monitoring are of crucial importance for leadership in the post-16 education sector. There is now much greater government influence over the everyday practices of FE and 6th Form Colleges in terms of rigorous targets, Learning Skills Council, (LSC) funding and budget controls and numerous audits.

Designed to increase accountability and transparency, these changes at national level have intensified work across the post-16 education sector. Local autonomy has been eroded as the number of inspections and auditing processes have increased dramatically. In addition to added workloads, pressures and stress, this can produce a conflict, highlighted by some respondents, between these new more commercial values and more traditional notions of the intrinsic value of education as an end in and of itself. It was often for these more intrinsic and community-based reasons that many of those interviewed so far originally decided to take-up a career in the post-16 education sector. Increasing commercialism sits somewhat uncomfortably with the more traditional role and values of the post-16 education sector and it produces a number of tensions, as the following comments illustrate,

> *"I was told that the problem for us is that people above us say 'F.E. takes anybody'. This is stated as a negative. I said I am proud to say that 'we take everybody'. Our message to the community is, 'come to us and we will help you reach your potential'."*
>
> *"The most successful 6th Form in this area offers the least options for students. That is supposed to be an example to us! Yet, we are covering a multitude of needs within the community in terms of learning. The government is constantly talking about choice, it just doesn't make sense."*

Many respondents remain attached to the traditional community-based role of the F.E. colleges. Hence, alongside the traditional role of the F.E. colleges as the providers of community-based learning opportunities is a growing pressure on the post-16 education sector to be much more commercially accountable and to be structured, organised and controlled by tight financial targets and priorities.

THE POWER OF AUDITING?

A key finding that has emerged in research interviews so far focuses on these performance targets and funding mechanisms that are now routinely used in the post-16 sector. These are an important mechanism through which the Government and the LSCs seek to provide leadership for the sector. Interviewees repeatedly highlight what they see as the excessive monitoring and contradictory funding mechanisms that characterise the post-16 sector. Many respondents at various hierarchical levels express the view that the multiplicity of audits has now reached counter-productive levels.

A number of respondents in senior positions complain that the amount of staff needed to provide the very detailed information to service and satisfy the audit requirements of the different bodies is extremely expensive and unsustainable for F.E. and 6th Form colleges. The frustration of many respondents is increased by the belief that much of the micro data required for different audits and assessments is of little real value. One of our case study FE Colleges is subject to the following audits:

Financial Statements Audit

(Annual audit of the accuracy and fairness of the contents of the financial statements. The opinion is expressed to the Corporation Board).

Regularity Audit

(Annual opinion on the regularity and probity of the expenditure that the college makes. The opinion is expressed to the Corporation Board and to the LSC).

Internal Audit

(60 day programme of audit assignments that are performed by an independent third party to give the Board assurance that financial controls are working effectively. The Board approve annually the areas to be audited).

PFA Audit

(Provider Financial Assurance arm of the LSC are part of the inspection process that look at the Governance and Financial Management aspects. Not annual but in line with inspection cycle).

ILR Audit

(Individualised Learner Record audit is an annual audit of the accuracy of the learner
record system, returns and claims for funding made to the LSC. Auditors are employed by LSC and opinion is to LSC).

Many research respondents express the view that the government in the guise of the LSCs has become fixated with auditing as the solution to all leadership and management problems in the sector. Their comments not only raise issues about how the government is exercising leadership within the sector, but also about how national-level policies might compromise leadership **within** post-16 organisations.

Our preliminary research suggests that the extent and the nature of the auditing processes may well be damaging leadership at a local level, especially in the eyes of followers, as the following comments indicate.

"Work in the post-16 education sector is frequently driven by performance targets. One of the problems here is that these different targets can be in tension with one another. Leaders and more junior staff alike are under intense pressure to achieve multiple and at times conflicting government targets."

"The Learning and Skills Council are much more performance related but they keep changing the goalposts. We have postcode funding and a ferocious audit regime with no tolerance. We are paid three times a year. If the students are here in November we get the funding. If they are gone in February then we have no funding. Therefore most lecturers have retention targets per course. This does not take into account that in this area we have a transient population with a lot of students passing through. We also have an area in which it is easy for young people to get work. So students often move on or are drawn away from study to earn quick money."

"There is so much time devoted to the data collection that drives funding. The number of staff needed to service data collection is unbelievable".

It is very evident from our research so far that the social, political and financial conditions and consequences of target-driven evaluation systems, mediated through the LSCs, constitutes a central challenge for **local** leadership in the post-16 sector.

A number of respondents have argued that the policy of 'management by audit' produces a significant disparity: while the LSCs require detailed performance information from FE Colleges and 6th Form Centres, they provide little or no guidance on likely future plans for the sector. The Government and the LSCs demand highly specific data, frequently updated very regularly, even in some cases on a daily basis, to calculate funding. Yet, by contrast, mid and long term policy on education seems to be a complete mystery to many we have interviewed in the sector. They also feel very distant and unable to influence strategic decision-making made at LSC and Government department level. To many of our interviewees, there appears to be a fundamental inconsistency in the way that leadership at this level is being enacted within the post-16 sector.

In addition, many respondents view governmental policies in relation to education as perpetually in a state of flux and change, which in turn can create confusion and frustration at local level, as one FE College Principal explained,

> *"There are a lot of pressures from outside, a multitude of targets and at times, conflicting targets. There are real pressures to achieve phenomenal targets. Nobody objects to being accountable but this constant changing of the goalposts is very difficult. Funding regimes in FE are highly complex. IF GOVERNMENT WOULD JUST GET OFF OUR BACKS FOR 5 MINUTES!"*
>
> *"This is the worst period of instability in relation to F.E. funding ever."*
>
> One 6th Form Head expressed his considerable frustration,
>
> *"The Government want changes yesterday. Instead of a 2 year plan we need a 10 year plan. The government changes the aims annually. These changes are imposed on us. They don't just move the goalposts they move the pitch! The problem is that politicians are worried about headlines and the next election. In my view education should come out of politics. If I wasn't retiring, I would pack it in!"*

A further related issue which has recently arisen in the research is that in 2005 the LSC in one region of the country has advised colleges (mid-year) that, due to LSC over-spending, they need to claw-back £3 million pounds from the whole of the education sector. This claw-back is being imposed on colleges by the LSC. Many college principals see this as a breach of trust and are considering how to respond. Most senior staff we have interviewed believe they will have to accept the LSC's demands for this claw-back, as the comments of one finance officer illustrate,

"They can ask, we can say no, but the perception is, if you resist them you will be penalised next year."

This unexpected claw-back announcement has strengthened the view of senior staff in the sector that funding commitments given to colleges by the LSC are increasingly perceived to be totally unreliable. It suggests to many of our respondents that the stated LSC policy of operating with a three year planning cycle now seems little more than 'hollow words'. Several respondents have highlighted the point that while FE Colleges are held to account

by LSCs and are penalised for 'poor' performance or inconsistent practice, the same does not appear to be the case for LSCs themselves.

"Policy development from the LSC is on the hoof."

"The LSC has said that the three year development planning is off, they will only look at year 05-06."

Such (perceived) inconsistencies raise fundamental questions about the relationship of the LSC to FE Colleges, about how performance is managed and how leadership is enacted. They also raise questions about the local and national LSC management structure, financial controls and accountability.

A particularly important and recurrent finding here is that Principals, Heads and other senior managers have lost confidence in the LSCs. Although they frequently acknowledge a collaborative relationship with their local LSC representatives, they view these local organisations merely as conduits for national LSC agendas. The main concern of national level LSCs is financial control through the management of targets that are in turn driven by central government. Hence, the Principals and Heads we have interviewed in both F.E. Colleges and 6th Forms consider local LSCs to be largely powerless bodies who simply provide a buffer zone to ensure the implementation of national LSC policy. On the one hand, F.E. leaders emphasise that they have developed, and wish to maintain, very cordial and collaborative relations with local LSC representatives. On the other hand, the national LSC organization and its policy-making is perceived to be too rigid and mechanistic to respond to any specific local issues raised by Principals.

Hence, a key preliminary research finding here is the disillusionment of both leaders and led in FE colleges and 6th Forms with the intensified audit culture and with the contribution of the local and national LSCs to the post-16 sector. Whilst this was not an initial focus of the research, respondents have repeatedly highlighted this issue (without prompting from us). It raises fundamental questions regarding leadership in education both at national and local levels. The fundamental impact of this audit culture in the post-16 sector also has a number of very important 'knock-on' effects in the sector in terms of leadership style, staff commitment, retention and recruitment and career succession, which are now considered in turn.

LEADERSHIP STYLE

As stated in the first working paper, respondents' widely preferred leadership style is consultative and open. However, when asked whether there are any barriers to adopting their preferred leadership style, various respondents have highlighted a number of issues, many of which are related to the audit culture in the post-16 sector.

Q. What are the key barriers and dilemmas you face in implementing your preferred leadership style?

FE Principals and other senior managers have claimed with knowledge that the pressurised culture of responding to numerous, highly demanding audits and sometime unrealistic targets can force them to adopt a more directive, controlling and detached leadership style, even though this is not their preferred approach. The auditing demands of governing agencies and their multiple, sometimes conflicting, targets mean that in certain circumstances, Principals are not able to fully utilize their preferred leadership style.

This in turn can erode trust in leadership further down the hierarchy. The research has found that staff at lower levels of the organisation frequently believe that the Principal's leadership style reflects their personality and values. Hence, the relationship and trust between Principal and more junior staff, between leaders and led, can suffer because of the severity of the targets imposed on educational organisations by LSCs and central government and the pressures this produces within post-16 organisations. It is sometimes difficult for those in leadership positions to act in consistent ways given the changing nature of the pressures and expectations placed upon them from outside funding bodies. In this sense, these pressures for ever-more accountability and scrutiny may actually be damaging and eroding leaders' credibility (especially in the eyes of 'followers') within the post-16 education sector.

STAFF COMMITMENT

The first working paper outlined our finding of the high level of staff commitment to their students, programmes, colleges and communities. This commitment is set against the ever-increasing changes and pressures within the sector. However, the research has also found that staff's energy and enthusiasm is under threat due to increasing workloads and ever changing targets. The research so far, has identified that the key constraints on staff motivation are a lack of time and money, as the following statements illustrate,

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Q. What are the most significant constraints that impact on staff motivation?

"Staff feel that they are constantly being asked to do more for less."

"Time is a key constraint. There is just not enough time to discuss issues fully with people. I need more time, all the staff need more time."

"The workload is so diverse. The paperwork is horrendous! Then there is the teaching time and we are also internal examiners for each others' work. On top of that, the key criteria for my assessment is, improve student attendance, absenteeism, retention and also update my qualifications."

"Everyone is bogged down. Staff work so hard. I used to do outreach to the community but I can't do that anymore due to time pressures. We really need to give people more time."

"Lack of money. For example we had a change of systems twice, this means we need a change of books but there is no money. The first change, we made do with the books, but with the second change, we just could not do that. We were told to improvise and use the internet. It can be so demoralising."

"Strategies are introduced and it is not clear to anyone what value they have. We just do not have the time or money to play around with these things. Then resistance occurs from departments and senior people wonder why!"

BARRIERS TO STAFF RETENTION AND RECRUITMENT

An important leadership challenge within FE colleges in particular is staff retention and recruitment. This is a constant concern for staff at various hierarchical levels. Within FE colleges pay levels and terms and conditions (such as teaching hours and holiday entitlement) tend to compare unfavourably with those in schools and especially in 6th Forms Centres. As a result FE Colleges are experiencing a 'brain drain' from the college to the schools sector of experienced staff due to these comparative inequalities in pay and benefit levels.

This loss of staff to schools and 6th Forms presents significant problems and contradictions for senior and middle managers. Research respondents have described various examples of staff who have resigned to take up a position within schools or 6th Forms after their managers had been unable to grant a request for a pay rise. Paradoxically, the same managers were then forced to advertise the position and ultimately had to pay the replacement person the equivalent, or, in some cases even more than, the original staff member who had requested a salary increase.

"It is really frustrating. I have just lost a really long-standing and highly valued member of staff to a local 6th Form. She didn't want to leave and I did not want to lose her because she is excellent in all areas of her work. She really was committed to the college, but, at the end of the day, I could not offer her any kind of a pay rise. The real sting for me is that, we have had to offer her replacement, who is much less experienced, a higher salary, and I know if we had offered this increase to 'Sally' she would have stayed."

"In the last year I have lost three experienced and valued staff to school sixth forms. It is so frustrating because I know none of them wanted to leave. They were longstanding staff who felt a deep connection to the college. But what can I do, except wish them well? I just could not reward them. It can be soul destroying to have to watch it happen."

"You need to make sure that staff are told 'well done'. However, realistically pay is a big issue. Salary levels have now slipped below schoolteachers. We are struggling to reward and recruit. This is true across the sector. The government gives money

but then takes it away again i.e. National Insurance. People in the sector don't feel as valued in pay terms."

"I want to be able to give my staff a regular pay rise. I can deal with all the rubbish round the edges but I want to reward them."

Most research respondents recognise that the staff who leave tend to be the most marketable teachers. This means that there is pressure on new recruits to provide the same very high level of courses and to manage and discipline classes for students whose expectations have been shaped by more experienced teachers.

Pay is therefore a key leadership issue for the sector generally and FE colleges particularly. When leaders are unable to retain their most experienced and valued staff, their power and authority as leaders can begin to be eroded in the eyes of their subordinates. Equally, it can intensify their own workload, not least because they have to invest precious time in recruiting new colleagues.

One middle manager in an FE College explained that after being unable to dissuade several highly experienced members of his department from leaving, he was forced to recruit much less experienced replacement staff who he then had to coach in the skills of producing interesting classes and in disciplining students. Although this 'tutoring of the tutors' was not part of his job description, it became a priority responsibility and resulted in him having to neglect other important aspects of his formal responsibilities.

BARRIERS TO CAREER SUCCESSION AND CAREER PLANNING

Respondents, especially Principals, have also expressed the view that the audit culture is hampering succession planning. Principals we have interviewed are of the view that the increasingly diverse and intensified workload of Principals is becoming a significant barrier to senior and middle managers applying for jobs at Principal level. Interviews with staff at different levels of the colleges have supported this perception. Many respondents from senior manager to lecturer level emphasise that the job of Principal is highly stressful and in some cases almost impossible. As the following senior manager stated;

"I could never do the Principal's job. It is so diverse. You have to know what goes on in the college, what is happening in the region, what is going on at a political level. You need to be out in the community, seen to be active at all levels within the college, keep up-to-date with the constant changes from the politicians, deal with all the Government bodies and manage the finances. It is an impossible job".

To summarise, our research has found that the intensified and seemingly all-pervasive audit culture is tending to erode and damage leadership within the post-16 sector. In some cases respondents' preferred consultative style of leadership is being compromised in order to meet targets and satisfy auditors. The growing pressures of work and the lack of time and money are increasingly impacting negatively on staff commitment, retention, recruitment and succession planning.

THE IMPACT OF INEQUALITIES?

In many ways the FE sector is at the 'leading edge' of disadvantage in their local communities. FE colleges play a crucial role in providing a 2nd chance for those students who, for a multitude of reasons, have under-achieved in mainstream education and/or who experience barriers to their education as a result of disadvantage, poverty and other domestic problems. Yet, not only is this valuable role often under-appreciated, but colleges themselves can become trapped within a similar vicious cycle of disadvantage to that experienced by some F.E. students. Certainly, within the UK education sector, FE colleges are frequently perceived as low status educational institutions, dealing with the most deprived and difficult students. They are viewed as the 'poor relations' of the U.K. education system. From Principals down, staff in the FE sector have expressed strong views that their sector has not received the funding and support enjoyed by other areas of the UK education sector such as schools, sixth form centres and universities. Respondents have referred to FE Colleges as the 'Cinderella sector' of UK education.

In many research interviews so far, respondents have expressed, often in quite forceful ways, their frustration that those in government do not value or even fully understand what is accomplished in the FE sector, not least because they know so little about what happens in this area of education. It is widely believed that ministers have no personal, direct experience of FE colleges because the children of MPs are much more likely to

attend 6th Form Centres and to then go on to university. Most research respondents therefore perceive many Ministers to be largely distant and detached from the FE sector.

This sense of being 'a second-class sector' (particularly in the eyes of successive governments) is reinforced on a daily basis in a number of ways. In what follows, we illustrate this sense of being undervalued by discussing issues around, first, the quality of the working environment in many colleges and second, the specific policy of 'extending access' that is currently a key issue for FE Colleges in their local communities.

WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Within the FE sector generally, there appears to have been an under investment in buildings, décor and facilities (and these are certainly perceived by respondents to have been neglected). Principals and other senior managers highlight the de-motivating effects of a degraded environment. Unlike the universities, which have been able to develop their own financial resources, FE colleges have enjoyed no such financial freedom. In addition, the banks are unwilling to provide funds, as they apparently remain sceptical about the future of the FE colleges, as one Principal explained,

"We have run out of cash and our two existing banks have said no. They explained that the reasons are not related to our college but are F.E. related. We have now been told that we have to borrow 40% from the banks before any other LSC funding will be given. The problem is that there are only a limited number of banks that are willing to play in this market."

Similarly, while schools receive 100% funding for capital projects, F.E. Colleges are required to 'match funding'. This clearly represents a disadvantage colleges face in seeking to manage their infrastructure especially when compared with other educational organisations in the UK.

During research interviews respondents have raised this issue (unexpectedly) many times. Staff within F.E. colleges are frequently working in quite shabby and tired premises. This is the case even in some institutions that are very successful in terms of Ofsted assessments. Respondents have repeatedly expressed concerns about the negative effect on staff and student morale alike of the poor quality of the environment. Certainly, the

energy, professionalism and enthusiasm of staff is, in many cases, in stark contrast to their working environment.

Another recurrent example of the poor quality working environment in the post-16 sector and one that (again somewhat unexpectedly) is repeatedly raised by respondents is that of litter. Frequently, in research interviews especially with senior staff, the issue of litter has been mentioned as a particular problem on campus. Staff appear to be divided about the best way to deal with this problem. One group adhere to a disciplinary view which suggests that anyone seen dropping litter should be spoken to at once. This is seen by some interviewees as the best way to deter students. Another view is that litter should be seen as 'everyone's problem' and FE employees should pick up litter as an example to students.

At one institution, the Head was very visible in spending time picking up litter. Some teachers considered this to be a futile exercise when there were no sanctions for students who did throw litter. Research interviews with students in both Sixth Form Centres and FE colleges on the issue of litter have given quite strong support to the latter view. While students agree that litter is a problem on campuses, they are adamant that seeing staff pick up litter does not provide the good example that certain staff believe it does. Students have stated very clearly, that if teachers pick up litter, then they would just allow them to continue to do so, as the following statement demonstrates,

"Most students want better control on the litter……but we just think less of the teachers who pick up litter……..students say 'let them do it'. We want a litter free environment but we don't know how to get it."

It would appear from the research interviews so far that litter is seen as a significant problem by many staff and students. Students are very clear that attempts by staff to set an example (to students) by picking up litter is counter-productive. One way forward may be to create a space for discussions between staff and students on the best way to tackle this problem of litter.

EXTENDING ACCESS?

At the same time as the government is introducing a new commercial culture, it is also encouraging post-16 organisations to 'widen access' to their learning programmes. Indeed 'extending access' is currently a core feature of government policy for the FE sector. A significant proportion of FE college students are from disadvantaged backgrounds. In this context, the policy of extending access has considerable potential and is strongly supported by the FE staff we have interviewed. Yet, the research has discovered a number of tensions and contradictions regarding the implementation of this policy at local level. This section presents examples of some of these tensions that can constitute major challenges for leadership and for implementing the policy of 'extending access'.

Staff at various levels have raised issues about the local implementation of this national policy. Respondents have complained that there is a lack of government understanding about the practical implications of extending access at College level. Identifying young people from deprived backgrounds and encouraging them back into education requires a deep understanding of many issues and problems that these students can bring with them into college. The commitment of disadvantaged students to college work can (for different reasons) be somewhat variable. Several respondents have acknowledged that students from deprived backgrounds, the very students colleges are trying to attract, enrol and retain, sometimes bring with them particular problems such as swearing, fighting and general disruptive behaviour. As one respondent explained,

"We have students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This means everything takes more time. We do not have too many middle class parents who value education. Some of our kids are swimming against the tide, at college and at home."

"I would make it compulsory that every member of staff spends time in an associate school with middle ability kids for 3 days a year…….if they were to go to the poorest wards it would shock some of the staff here. It is desperate in these places. There is violence and drugs. Incredibly awful things happen to some of our kids."

The emphasis on extending access is frequently in tension with the considerable pressure on colleges to meet other government targets, as the following comment exemplifies,

"There is too much evaluation and the problem is how it is measured. We measure 'value added'. This is the only meaningful measure when recruiting from disadvantaged backgrounds. When we do widen our participation, our success rate goes down. There is an inherent contradiction in what they are asking us to do and how they measure us."

At one highly successful FE college based in a seaside town, attracting, retaining, motivating and educating students is a particular challenge because of the nature of the communities it serves. The abundance of low paid, seasonal jobs in a seaside economy also means that students from poor backgrounds can be attracted into seasonal jobs rather than education. For example, the local leisure park rewards temporary workers with a bonus if they stay in employment until the end of the summer season (defined as the end of October). This clashes with the start of the academic year at College and thus can crucially threaten student registration, retention and performance that, in turn, can jeopardise college performance targets and ultimately funding levels.

In this community, where there are wards with approximately 40% of people who are illiterate and innumerate (well above the national average of approximately 20%), a number of factors can restrict student access to further education opportunities. Staff highlighted some of the issues that disadvantaged students are more likely to experience:

- A lack of money for everyday living expenses that other students take for granted.

- Difficult home environments where there can be abuse, drug taking, poverty and hunger.

- Pressure to earn money not just for themselves but also for their families.

Such pressures on students can subsequently create significant problems for post-16 employees who are responsible for their educational and personal welfare whilst in College. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds can experience more difficulties in managing the academic requirements of courses, which in turn, means that staff have to spend much more time supporting them but this 'support time' is not adequately acknowledged within the timetable. This in turn increases pressure on staff who are

already trying to manage ever-increasing workloads. As we stated earlier, research respondents in FE and 6th Form Colleges at all levels have highlighted a lack of time as a key constraint on their everyday working performance. This scarcity of time for staff to meet ever-increasing workloads, targets and paperwork is a clear finding of the research so far.

The FE staff interviewed at various hierarchical levels again tend to be split into two quite discrete views on the issue of how best to deal with disruptive types of student behaviour. The first group subscribe to a 'disciplinary view'. Believing that a few disruptive students can undermine the learning of the majority of students, they argue that there should be a consistent approach to students who are demonstrating poor behaviour in terms of repercussions and discipline. The second group highlight the contradiction in the Government's policy of extending access. They feel that the government does not really understand that extending access means that the colleges are taking students from very poor backgrounds and these students can struggle in many different areas. Their approach tends to be less focussed on discipline and more concerned with understanding some of the tensions that can arise for these students.

The following case was highlighted by one of the respondents in the latter group. A student was caught fighting in a corridor over a minor incident with a bag. Staff wanted him to be disciplined in order to deter this type of behaviour in others. The Senior Tutor for Pastoral Care discovered that the student was living at home with just an alcoholic father who was abusive and who took all the money. Consequently, the student had no money, had not been eating properly and was highly stressed. Another student had kicked his bag and he had reacted by hitting him. The tutor resisted pressure from other colleagues to discipline the student. Instead, he arranged for the relevant people within the college and the social services to help the student. Working together, these departments, assisted the student to acquire independent living accommodation. The student has since been progressing well.

This type of careful and persistent pastoral support and supervision takes considerable time and resources that have to be met within the existing work time schedules and within the existing workforce. The increasing pressure on colleges to meet externally-defined targets (such as registrations, retention and access extension) results in college staff having to engage increasingly in these kind of supervisory pastoral and social work responsibilities. For example, the pressure on colleges to meet student attendance targets

means that considerable staff resources can be dedicated to morning telephone calls to the homes of all those who not in class. Such additional pressures that accrue directly from the policy of 'extending access' in the context of other tight performance targets constitute a fundamental challenge for the local leadership and management of FE colleges and 6th Forms.

GENDER AND EXTENDING ACCESS

In addition to issues of poverty, student age, gender and ethnicity profiles can also weaken the effectiveness of the policy of extending access.[1] In relation to age, there is a widespread feeling across the sector that older students are less favourably funded. Yet, it is often the relatively mature students, who have previously been marginalized by mainstream education, that 'extending access' is designed to help. One FE Principal explained to us that,

"The Colleges that are doing well are those that focus on the 16-18 range. Funding and student numbers in this area are at their highest level for 20 years. Colleges that have high adult numbers, like we do, are not doing so well."

Accordingly, staff at all levels within those FE colleges that are seeking to extend access by attracting adult learners back into education feel that they are being disadvantaged by present funding arrangements.

This is particularly evident when disadvantage, age and gender intersect. Interviews with several relatively mature women students identified specific pressures and contradictions for single mothers who have returned to education in order to obtain qualifications that would enable them to move off benefits and return to the labour market. For example, a single mother who takes a full-time HND course loses her benefits. This increases the pressures associated with trying to balance studying, earning sufficient money to maintain the household and also the additional expense of childcare whilst working to fund their studies. The following quotations illustrate the barriers to study that are a central part of the every day lived experience for many mature students,

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[1] We will consider issues of ethnicity in more detail in a separate working paper.

"I need to take a full-time course to get a qualification which will enable me to come off benefits and work. I cannot take a full-time course because I will lose my benefit and have to work to study. I have no money for childcare while I work and couldn't earn enough combining working and studying to pay my bills and keep my children."

"I will have completed 7 yrs of part-time study when I finish this course but things have changed in that time and I have been told that employers will be looking for a higher education qualification now. I try not to give up but it just gets harder. I need to get into a reasonably paid job. It is really important for me to show my children that education will get them a job and a job will get them a better life. I want to set them the example, there is only me who can do that."

"The course is 15 hours so it enables me to keep my benefits. Transport is also funded, Monday all day, Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday morning. The catch is now that the further educational course is more vocational so at the end of studying it will not allow you to get a job with an adequate salary level to come off benefits."

"I already work doing school lunches for 3 days a week to make ends meet and even now I cannot pay all my bills even though I never go out. I wake up at night worrying about the bills. It is just one worry after another, how to manage the studying, the working, look after my children and pay all the bills. It is my dream to come off benefits one day."

"It can be so difficult meeting work deadlines especially during school holidays. There is childcare available for the Easter holidays but it costs £40 a week for children between 8-14. £40 a week is impossible for me. It is an enormous sum of money when you are living on benefits. I cannot even begin to think what it would be like to be able to spend £40 a week just on childcare."

"There is no way I could take the loan. How could I pay it back? I keep myself debt free by working as much as I can, juggling the money and worrying. Why would I get myself into debt? That is why I want to work to avoid getting into debt."

Hence, some of the very issues that the policy of extending access is intended to address (for example poverty, age, gender) can become significant barriers to its effective implementation. In sum, this policy of extending access to students from disadvantaged backgrounds raises important leadership challenges for senior, middle and junior teaching and administrative staff as well as students themselves. It also raises important questions about the contribution of the LSCs to policy implementation at local level.

LEARNING SKILLS COUNCILS AND EXTENDING ACCESS

Particularly where education has a low priority in the lives of many in the community, extending access is especially important. In theory, colleges can apply to the local LSC to fund new courses that 'extend access'. These can be funded by the LSC under the heading of 'Any Other Provision' (AOP).

At one FE College, the LSC agreed to fund a basic skills course in the area of motor vehicle maintenance. This type of course can be a very important starting point, especially for students with poor literacy and numeracy skills. Whilst the course does not provide a qualification, it can help build student confidence, enabling them to return to mainstream FE and thus reinforcing the policy of 'extending access'. Staff at this college spent considerable time preparing this new course. However, just before they were about to begin, the LSC announced that it had overspent for the year and could no longer provide funding. With all LSC funding under AOP cancelled at very short notice, the course had to be withdrawn by the college. One of the course organisers commented,

"We have done all the work to get the courses off the ground and now we have to just drop them. It is very frustrating. The outcome is that staff lose confidence in the LSC's ability to deliver."

"We have students ready to take the course but we have had to turn them away. All the work has been for nothing."

This is one of several examples we have found of promised LSC funding that was subsequently withdrawn just at the point when the new course was about to be delivered in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

These initial research findings identify some very significant leadership challenges and barriers to effective leader-led relations within the post-16 education sector. In particular, they raise fundamental questions about power, distance and inequality in the post-16 sector. Paradoxically, those in local leadership positions express frustration about the level and nature of the power and control exercised by central government, the LSCs and other auditing bodies. In this sense the current audit culture in F.E. Colleges and 6th Form Centres appears to be eroding rather than strengthening leadership at local level.

The high levels of frustration expressed by many of our respondents, particularly about the nature and extent of monitoring and auditing is further exacerbated by the extent to which respondents believe that there is a problematic distance between themselves and those designing policy for the sector. Respondents expressed the view that they have very little opportunity to influence the formulation of the policies that they must then implement. Their responses reveal a fundamental sense of distance from and frustration about policies that they frequently believe are misconceived from the perspective of the local level. Equally, we have found that issues of inequality both for students and for colleges constitute a fundamental challenge for leadership in the post-16 sector. The deprivation of many students and the disadvantage of the FE colleges frequently seem to reflect and reinforce one another.

These preliminary research findings reinforce our initial assumptions about the nature of leadership as a complex organizational and social rather than simply an individual process. We have found that in many cases our respondents act as both leaders and followers at the same time, skilfully managing these two roles. Yet in addition, and of more concern, we have also found that the intensified audit culture that currently shapes post-16 education, tends to force staff, including those in the most senior formal leadership positions, into the role of follower. This can significantly weaken leadership in the post-16 sector.

On the basis of these initial findings (about power, distance and inequality), the final section of this working paper now outlines various preliminary recommendations for improving leadership (and educational practice) in the post-16 sector. We would recommend that these issues are integrated into the CEL programme delivery. But, more

broadly, we also present them as challenges for government in managing and leading the post-16 education sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Initial research findings that could be translated into 'actionable messages' for national and local leadership include the following:

Critically Evaluate and Change Current Funding and Audit Mechanisms

Alternative evaluation processes and funding mechanisms that are better able to recognise and encourage good practice should be explored. Currently, it appears that the intensive audit culture is eroding the potential for creative leadership within the sector.

Critically Evaluate and Change the Current Role, Practices and Power of the LSC

Our preliminary research suggests that the role, focus and leadership of the LSC in relation to FE is in need of urgent review. Currently, it appears that the role of the LSC is eroding the potential for creative leadership within the sector.

Pay

This has been repeatedly mentioned as an important issue both for teaching and administration staff. Pay is no longer competitive with other areas of education. Consequently, the recruitment and retention of staff can present significant leadership problems for FE colleges. In order to support local leadership within the sector, the government as a matter of urgency could address the disparities in pay and working conditions (e.g. teaching hours and holidays) between FE college employees and those in schools and in 6th Form Centres.

Working Environment

Respondents at all levels have highlighted the importance of working environment. Various examples of small but effective changes have been provided. Staff who have experienced even slight improvements in their environment repeatedly point to the uplifting effect on morale and motivation (e.g. new desks and chairs).

Provide Stable Funding and Support for 'Extending Access' Policy

At minimum the objectives of extending access need to be clarified and the various tensions in the present system should be addressed. These are important issues for leaders in FE colleges. Current problems at local level highlight the need for more nuanced and subtle national policy initiatives to facilitate implementation. Without effective national-level leadership, support and stable funding, the policy of extending access will almost certainly falter at local level.

Systematic Succession Planning

Given the increasing remit and responsibilities at Principal and Head level, providing a systematic approach to career succession planning is of crucial importance to assist the sector in identifying prospective leaders and senior managers. A preliminary recommendation of the research is that any leadership succession planning should be designed in ways that can actively identify and encourage talented staff at the Head of Department level and not just concentrate on those in senior management teams.

The research has identified extremely talented and able staff, particularly at the level of Head of Department, who demonstrate the ability to manage a variety of tasks in a competent and enthusiastic manner. They also appear to be contributing new ideas and creating systems that assist the smooth running of their departments. These staff are enthusiastic about and empathise with the student body and also demonstrate, through example, the importance of remaining student-focussed whilst managing the increased administration tasks. It should be possible to ensure that 'fast-track' career progression is achieved through the effective integration of leadership development and certification. We would also recommend that any training and evaluation systems for succession planning should ensure that future F.E. leaders retain a strong student focus in their policy and practice.

A further initial finding is that Principals and Heads of School who have had experience of working at different institutions during their career appear to bring a wide knowledge, experience and perspective to the job of Principal. This early finding suggests the importance of developing career structures that encourage potential principals to gain from the experiential benefits of geographical mobility as a valuable step for achieving promotion to the position of Principal. It is also recommended that any new career succession programmes will need to be developed through the involvement of the professional staff within the sector.

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