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Communities of leadership in FE

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The Nature of Leadership

Communities of Leadership in FE

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Leadership for the Learning and Skills Sector

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Executive Summary

This working paper highlights the significance of **multiple communities** as crucial conditions, processes and consequences of FE leadership. Our research suggests that in (almost) all their activities FE colleges **engage** communities. They make important, but frequently under-estimated contributions to the local community and economy. This is the case **within** colleges (e.g. students and employees), **between** colleges and their multiple-partners (e.g. in the local community and economy) and **between** different colleges (e.g. professional networks and associations between Principals). The paper argues that in the FE sector communities and leadership are inextricably-linked, sometimes in mutually-reinforcing, but also in potentially contradictory ways. These communities are not only **both** internal **and** external to colleges themselves, they are also multiple and diverse, frequently shifting, interacting and impacting in complex, simultaneous ways. Our working paper:

1. Outlines (some of) the multiple communities served by FE colleges. In particular, we explore the FE college as: **a learning community, a socially inclusive community, an inclusive learning community and a provider of adult and community learning.**

2. Examines some of the important challenges for those occupying FE leadership positions in seeking to engage with these multiple communities. Our research findings suggest that on-going attempts to engage diverse communities constitute a crucial challenge for effective FE leadership.

3. Suggests a different way of understanding the nature of FE leadership. This indicates that a 'blended leadership' (Collinson and Collinson 2005c) approach may be particularly effective in engaging multiple, shifting communities in sustainable ways.

4. Suggests that the community contribution of FE colleges is frequently neglected and/or under-estimated. Many of the staff we have interviewed argue that important aspects of colleges' community engagements remain invisible or undervalued, particularly by those who evaluate performance and make funding decisions. In particular, the current sector-wide cuts in the funding of adult and community learning are likely to have a detrimental impact on FE colleges' traditional community role.

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'FE is a really good transition from school to work. In here you meet the whole community, everyone from doing degrees to those who are struggling to write their own names because of learning disabilities. This diversity of people and talents in the college mirrors what's out there in the community. The college is a scaled down version of the community. Foster got it right. The role of the general FE college is to develop the skills and abilities of the local community. We make our students more employable so that they have a decent life and get rewarded for their hard work.....But the funding mechanisms make us feel like second-class citizens. My worry is that FE education will disintegrate and only then will they realise what they have lost. The experience in other countries shows that FE fairs best when the local community funds it. Control from London just does not work. The government needs to make up its mind. Does it want an FE sector or not?'

(College Principal)

Introduction

In conducting our research for The Centre for Excellence in Leadership over the past two and a half years we have witnessed first hand the vibrant, dynamic and energetic communities that typically characterise FE colleges. We have interviewed staff, students and members of the local community who make use of the extensive facilities provided by the colleges. More informally, we have eaten in the college cafés and the public restaurants and have spent time just sitting in the reception areas, the libraries, corridors and the communal areas, watching the diversity of people from the community flowing in and out of the colleges. We have listened to the conversations of students (not difficult if you just sit still in one area). In all our research organizations we have been afforded extensive access to students and staff. On several occasions, after completing our scheduled research interviews, we have spent some time walking around college campuses. Whilst on these walkabouts, we have chatted to students whose ages range from 14 to 70+, and who are drawn from all sections of society. Our experience as researchers and participant observers tends to confirm the above statement from a college Principal, that colleges are very real reflections of their local communities and therefore of society.

This working paper highlights the significance of communities in, of and for FE leadership. Our research suggests that in (almost) all their activities FE colleges and their leadership(s) are **intensely community-focussed**. Colleges make important, but frequently under-estimated contributions to community cohesion and economic development. This is the case in relation to communities **within** colleges (e.g. regarding students and employees), **between** colleges and their multiple-partners (e.g. in the local community) and between different colleges (e.g. networks and associations between Principals). Within the FE sector, communities and leadership are frequently inextricably-linked, typically in mutually-reinforcing, but also sometimes in conflicting, paradoxical and contradictory ways. These communities are not only **both** internal **and** external to colleges, they are also multiple and diverse, frequently shifting, interacting, overlapping and impacting in complex, simultaneous ways. Our research suggests that on-going attempts to engage, combine and integrate these multiple communities constitutes a crucial challenge for effective FE leadership.

The Importance of Community/ies

Within contemporary UK policy and research, ideas about community are increasingly influential. Suggestive of more participative and less hierarchical principles, notions of community, collaboration and cooperation are particularly dominant in educational research. In terms of pedagogy, teacher training and moral education, there has been a clear shift away from the individual to a focus on community. It is typically argued that, by building 'sustainable' communities, schools, colleges and universities can reinforce a sense of solidarity, membership, belonging, identity and self-worth. Emphasising community ideals of interrelationship and interdependence, educational organizations may strengthen trust, co-ordination, loyalty, a sense of justice and democracy and, ultimately, create better citizens. It is also increasingly recognised that communities frequently have a major impact on the quality of young people's lives and in shaping the quality of their learning.

There is also substantial interest in the notion of 'communities of practice'. Outlining 'situated learning' theory, Lave and Wenger (1991) suggested that individual members of communities learn by participating in shared activity. They argued that communities of practice inevitably occur when groups of people participate in shared activity, not merely in formal educational institutions, but also within many different settings like the home, the local community and particularly in the workplace (e.g. apprentices who learn from more experienced employees). Arguing that participation in communities of practice is a precondition for learning, Lave and Wenger emphasised that learning occurs and competences develop through ongoing activities, shared practices and in specific contexts.

Against this background the following working paper seeks to examine 'communities of leadership' in the context of the UK FE sector. Surprisingly few studies of community (and of learning) address the issue of leadership.[1] Conversely, within leadership studies, notions of community have tended to be neglected. In large part this is a consequence of the historical dominance of heroic, romanticised assumptions that equate effective leadership with charismatic and transformational individuals. By contrast, if we view leadership as a social, collective and interdependent process, the communities that comprise relations within and between 'leaders' and 'followers' also become a central concern.

1. One exception (which tends to prove the rule) is Wenger (2000) who argues that communities need multiple forms of leadership and these forms of leadership may be concentrated in one or two members or widely distributed, and this will change over time.

Influential research by Collins (2001) revealed that effective leaders in successful organizations focus on building communities rather than building their own reputations. Based on a study of 1,435 US companies over a 20-year period, Collins found that the most successful organizations were not led by 'larger than life' charismatic egoists (as might have been presumed), but rather by leaders who were quiet, modest, reserved, unpretentious, relatively humble and self-effacing. These 'level 5' leaders (as he termed them) channelled their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building the organization, its communities and its networks.[2]

Writers on management and organizational studies have highlighted the importance of managing organizational **culture** (e.g. Peters and Waterman 1982, Deal and Kennedy 2000). Emphasising the crucial importance of cultural meanings, Schein (2004) argued that the very 'essence of leadership' is the manipulation of symbols. Equally, Smircich and Morgan (1982) revealed the importance of understanding the symbolic role of leadership in constructing meanings and in defining reality for others in the organization. Drawing on these ideas, influential U.K. commentators increasingly suggest that FE leaders should focus on the effective management of culture. Culture management, that enhances a strong sense of community, is seen as the way to ensure a unified, cohesive and co-ordinated college (e.g. O'Connell 2005).

Yet, the construction of a cohesive organizational culture is often more complex than is frequently acknowledged. One danger of an essentially 'top-down' approach is that organizational cultures can be over-engineered with the result that open communication is rendered difficult. If employees feel they cannot speak openly (without potentially suffering reprisals), they may tend to concentrate more narrowly on communicating what is expected of them. Research in other sectors suggests that over-engineered cultures might produce employee compliance and conformity, but not necessarily generate staff commitment and creativity (Collinson 1992, 2005).

2. Attributing success to other people, external factors and good luck, level 5 leaders also displayed intense professional will, ferocious resolve, fearlessness and stoic determination. Comparison leaders were more concerned with their own reputation for personal greatness. These 'narcissistic leaders' blamed others for poor results, but were very keen to take all the credit for themselves when things went well. Level 5 leaders avoided creating a blame culture.

Within the literature the notion of community is frequently taken for granted as being highly desirable, a good thing in itself. Bauman (2001: 3) observes that the word typically conveys very positive images and these are particularly seductive because of the widespread loss of community, 'Community is nowadays another name for paradise lost – but one to which we dearly hope to return.' Indeed, there is a growing recognition that idealising or romanticising 'community' can be problematic.[3] An over-emphasis on community can reproduce pressures to conform through the demand for loyalty and the suppression of legitimate dissent. Community also conveys multiple possible meanings. For example, it has been used to refer to **where** people live, **how** they live or ways they might be **distinguished** from others (Reynolds 2000). Accordingly, the term risks being defined in so many different ways that it becomes a 'catch-all', meaning all (good) things to all people.

Recognising this conceptual ambiguity and imprecision, the following working paper is concerned to outline **concrete** examples of community engagement in FE. It documents (some of) the multiple and diverse communities routinely engaged with and served by FE colleges (as discovered in our research within 7 organizations, drawing on 140 research interviews). Whilst much of this FE work remains invisible and/or largely unacknowledged, these activities make an important contribution to the reproduction of sustainable local communities. Our paper examines some of the important challenges that emerge for those in FE leadership positions in seeking to engage these multiple communities and stakeholders.

3. This parallels the tendency to romanticise leaders. Wenger (2000: 230) acknowledges that, while communities of practice may be 'the cradles of the human spirit', they 'can also be its cages. After all, witch-hunts were also community practices.' Strike (2000) argues that ideas about community can be exclusionary, promoting sectarianism and eroding tolerance, citizenship and individual autonomy. Hodgson and Reynolds (2005) raise questions about control, indoctrination, discrimination, exclusion and the enforced coherence around a set of values. Rejecting attempts to deny difference, they question the tendency to homogenise identity, purpose and values. Greener and Perriton (2005) criticise the tendency for notions of community to be commercialised and interpreted in impoverished, narrow ways, which emphasise education as a product rather than viewing it as a learning process.

Communities of Leadership and the Leadership of Communities

Sustaining a learning community is a central ideal of FE colleges. Staff typically retain a high commitment to facilitating the growth and development of their students (Collinson and Collinson 2005a). This focus on the community contribution of FE is a very important aspect of staff job satisfaction across the sector. The learning cultures of the FE sector are sustained through leadership practices that affirm this crucial sense of community and mutual respect within colleges. While the acquisition of academic credentials is an important aspect of FE learning cultures, many research respondents have also emphasised to us the intrinsic importance of education and the potential growth it can produce in students. FE colleges provide credentials, but they also seek to encourage students to learn and develop confidence and respect for others and themselves.

The following discussion does not seek to provide an exhaustive account of the community leadership activities of the colleges we have researched. Rather it outlines four examples of the kind of (inter-related) community engagements FE colleges currently perform. In particular, we discuss the college as (1) a learning community, (2) a socially inclusive community (3) an inclusive learning community, and (4) as a provider of adult and community learning.

3.1 THE COLLEGE AS A LEARNING COMMUNITY

On entering an FE college, one is immediately struck by the diversity of courses, programmes and students that comprise the college community. The colleges we have researched all emphasise that they '*put learners' needs first*'. They explicitly seek to raise participation and attainment and to contribute to the LSC's vision that by 2010 young people and adults in England will have the knowledge and productive skills to match the best in the world. The community of students is therefore a very important priority engagement for all the general FE colleges that we have researched. These colleges provide a full range teaching portfolio, attracting large-scale enrolments on an annual basis for their taught programmes, typically across all 14 LSC areas of learning (although agriculture and horticulture constitute a smaller provision in most).

Providing courses from entry to degree level, they also offer a range of modes of attendance from full-time study to part-time, distance learning, work-based learning and e-learning. They offer academic and vocational learning for 16-19 year olds, vocational education and training for adults seeking employment, workforce development, basic literacy and numeracy skills, 'second chance' general education for adults and learning for leisure, personal and community development.

The colleges provide intensive basic skills training for both 16-18 year olds and 19+, from unaccredited learning to nationally recognised basic skills provision as well as vocational qualifications to 14-16 year olds. In addition, they offer higher education provision for local students, which is directly funded through HEFCE or indirectly through other HE institutions that accredit their degree programmes.

The mutually-reinforcing relationship between learning and leadership is particularly evident in the FE sector. While colleges provide a very broad spectrum of courses and programmes, they are especially successful at teaching vocational education. This is a key distinctive contribution made by FE colleges to the local, regional and national economies, as one Principal explained,

'Today the TES asked "why is FE so successful at teaching basic education?" The answer is simple. It's because FE does vocational work, like motor vehicle and hairdressing. Kids blossom here in the FE sector who otherwise would be lost to the education system. We don't make enough of that. This is very important to the economy. If people come out of FE with good basic skills, they can get a good job. We just don't make enough about our value and payback to the economy. The payback for me is that the kids realise that they are not as thick as they were told they were. They grow as people and as citizens.'

The vast majority of FE students live at home and are very much based in their local communities. A divisional manager in the teacher education department confirmed that the vast majority of student teachers come from within a 20 mile radius around the college.

While FE colleges are in many ways intensely local (in the sense that they provide training and educational opportunities for local students), they also attract growing numbers of overseas students, not only to undertake programmes at the College, but also at international centres in a variety of countries. For example, one of the colleges has partnerships with colleges in Sri Lanka, Singapore and Japan. The colleges also provide extensive support for the community of students on campus through departments dedicated to student support as well as high quality ICT, library facilities and learning resource centres. Many of the colleges also make an explicit policy commitment to environmental issues not only within the curriculum, but also in the management of their premises. Comprehensive support for students is a key and primary objective of all the colleges we have researched.

The mission statement of one of our case study colleges illustrates its community focus, as follows:

> *'The college will strive to be the best inclusive General Further and Higher Education College in the North of England. Our core values are: students come first, the people who work in the college are our most important resource, equality of opportunity for all, transparency and openness in all our dealings and close collaboration with our partners.'*

A primary objective of FE colleges is therefore to foster a learning community culture. For example, another Principal repeatedly emphasised the intrinsic value of FE education,

> *'It's not just about qualifications. The college's vocational emphasis creates the motivation to learn. People learn so much about themselves by being at college. Even if those studying hairdressing don't become hairdressers, they learn a lot about presenting themselves well.'*

Many lecturing staff have expressed similar views, for example,

> *'Education should open people's minds not just doors to a career.'*
>
> *'A basic principle of education is that people are treated with dignity and respect.'*

Creating a learning culture is about encouraging people to speak their own minds, as one manager in the teacher education department outlined,

> *'The basic principles of an effective education are about treating people with dignity and respect. We treat them in the way we want them to treat their students. It's about modelling best practice. We want people to say what they think. We say we value your opinion, we're all labourers in the field of knowledge. I learn from our students. It's great to see students going from being very shaky to being very confident.'*

One lecturer acknowledged that staff valued their Principal's commitment to the intrinsic values of education and to the ideal of a learning community,

'The Principal insists that, as a general FE college, we have to be inclusive. He wants to do right by people in the local community. He retains an element of a social conscience and a strong sense of the value of education for its own sake. Education can emancipate people. It should be seen as a good thing in itself.'

While this learning community involves a very strong emphasis on encouraging and respecting all students, respondents at all our research organizations have also emphasised the importance of maintaining student discipline. A sense of community and a sense of discipline are not seen by FE staff as incompatible (as either/or), but rather as mutually-reinforcing (as both/and). One Principal highlighted the crucial importance of discipline,[4] stating

'We have a zero tolerance policy here and all our students know it. We have very clear disciplinary procedures.'

He encourages all staff to maintain a strong disciplinary approach and to try to

'Nip any ill discipline in the bud. Get to them early so it will stop something much worse developing at a later stage. Every year when we have the big meeting with all the college staff, I tell them "You do not take any disrespect from students." Our students know about our discipline procedures.'

Hence, in maintaining sustainable learning cultures, many of those in senior positions in FE colleges seek to maintain a 'blended leadership' (Collinson and Collinson 2005c) approach based on a positive focus on community with a clear and explicit concern with discipline.

A very important community contribution by FE colleges is that they cater for large numbers of disadvantaged learners. For many of these students, who are typically drawn from the most deprived wards in local boroughs, there can be considerable personal and family barriers toward education. Colleges have to address these barriers, not only to attract students to enrol, but also to retain them during the course. Accordingly, it becomes even more important that colleges and their leadership are able to establish and sustain a strong learning culture and sense of community for its students. It is to the issue of social inclusion that we now turn.

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4. Student discipline is a recurrent issue raised by research respondents in all the colleges we have conducted research. In an earlier CEL working paper we discussed the issue of discipline in relation to litter (and chewing gum) dropped around campus (Collinson and Collinson 2005b).

3.2 THE COLLEGE AS A SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

A primary mission of FE colleges is to address and ameliorate social disadvantage. Pursuing this goal can lead colleges to develop extensive links with a wide range of other organizations in the local community, such as primary and high schools and the LEA, HE institutions, training organizations, the Youth Justice Service, the Probation Service, the Prison Service, Connexions, local employers and voluntary and community organizations. Several of our case study colleges have prison education contracts through which they provide education and training from basic skills to vocational skills for juveniles and young offenders. These colleges also seek to increase employer engagement and involvement through, for example, faculty links, business development projects and work-based learning programmes.

Expressing a strong commitment to principles and practices of social inclusion and diversity, all the colleges we have researched have in place extensive policy statements and documents, management information systems, monitoring mechanisms, action plans and communication processes specifically designed to enhance inclusion and diversity. Formal statements such as the following are quite commonplace and widely publicised,

'Our aim is to be inclusive and to provide high quality learning opportunities and a working environment which meets all the needs of students and staff fairly, equitably and consistently. The objectives that the College will pursue to achieve our vision will include: ensuring fair and equitable treatment for all. Taking positive action to promote the interests of the whole community while fostering mutual respect amongst all sections of the community.'

The colleges conduct regular audits, staff and student surveys, undertake considerable training and produce very detailed annual reports dedicated to the analysis and improvement of inclusion and diversity within colleges. They also seek to embed these principles into the teaching and tutorial curriculum.

FE college initiatives on inclusion and diversity can take many different forms and typically cover a very broad range of themes, issues and activities (often reflecting those that can be found in the local community), related to, for example: gender, race, ethnicity, faith, age, disabilities, learning difficulties and mental health. Several of our case study colleges have produced innovative learning programmes and positive actions to facilitate community development and understanding in the complex areas of inclusion and diversity. Indeed one of the colleges we have researched recently won a national award for its work on equality and diversity issues while another holds a national award for being 'Positive about Disability'.

This college also runs an annual summer open day entitled 'From Here to Diversity', and invites all members of the local community, including representatives from local organizations, dignitaries, churches, the LSC, governors etc to listen to numerous presentations on diversity issues and a general overview of college activities. The open day provides an important and successful way of showcasing the wide range of activities in which the college is engaged. Symbolising the openness of the college to the community, this event includes topics like 'curriculum impact in college and in the community', 'inclusive learning (supporting students with mental health problems)', 'contribution to the local community', 'work with external agencies', 'college staff initiatives', 'impact of staff development and training' and 'future action'. Although this college is based in a predominantly white, working class town, it is very committed to, and has an equality and diversity agenda for increasing BME students and staff. At the time of the research, the College had a higher percentage of ethnic minority staff than existed in the local population.

Our research has discovered cases where colleges have also intervened (with local police support) to eliminate racist behaviours by local communities towards international college students. Here is one example outlined by a senior manager in a specialist division of a general FE college.

Combating Racism in the Community

'We have a lot of overseas students and a large contingent from India. This is a very white working class area and a large group of Indian students living within the community created some tensions. The students experienced racism. We went out into the community to find out how the students were perceived. It became clear that as quite a few students had brought their wives with them this had fuelled a perception that the students were just using the college as a way to get into the country. In fact it couldn't be further from the truth. We worked with the local community groups and the police. We took groups of students and their wives to meetings within the community. The students talked about their homes and families and how they were working for a qualification to enrich their lives within their own country. This has helped enormously and the problems have been dramatically reduced.' During research interviews with overseas students, they also talked about the problem of racism in the local community. All the students valued college initiatives designed to breakdown prejudice within the community, as one overseas student explained, *'Obviously money is tight and the accommodation in the community is cheaper in certain areas. However, there were real tensions between the community and the students. It was not very pleasant. The college made a real effort to intervene and help. Things have definitely improved.'*

The issue of faith and community cohesion has also emerged as an important issue within the colleges where we have conducted research. One college in particular is situated in an area where one fifth of the local community population is Muslim, the third largest such population in Britain. The college has undertaken a number of initiatives designed to enhance faith, worship and community cohesion. For example, a prayer room has been created for the exclusive use of Muslim students with their own washing facilities. The college also invites an Islamic Chaplain Imam for regular visits and to lead prayer meetings (for the male students). However, college leaders openly recognise that they need to do much more to reach out to the local Muslim community.[5]

This college is participating in a research project specifically focussed on the Muslim community's perceptions and expectations in relation to the college. In particular, the College is seeking advice about how to promote a more positive image of the post-16 education sector as a desirable career to the local Muslim community, as the staff development manager stated,

'I do feel that the community's understanding and expectations could be improved if we increased the percentage of Muslim/Asian heritage colleagues in our staff. This is an FE-wide issue, but it does symbolise the distance between us and our community. So it would be very helpful to find out why Asian heritage people do not want to work for us. It must be about the perception of teaching and the role in the college. We have plenty of examples of our A level students who could do a good job for us as lecturers, but where have they gone? Why have they gone? What do they expect from the college? How could we improve communication with them?'

The Vice Principal added,

'If we could understand the expectations of Asian heritage students and their parents, it would really help us. We find it difficult to talk with Asian heritage parents.'

The research will focus on five main groups within the Muslim community. These include religious leaders, Muslim families, Muslim women's groups and Muslim men's groups. The college hopes that the research will improve their understanding about the expectations of the Muslim community and also assist the Muslim community to develop a better understanding of the culture, aims and objectives of the college.

5. The 2005 College annual report on equality and diversity reveals that 32% of students in the age group 16-18 are of Asian heritage. This percentage is higher than is found in the local community where ethnic minorities represent around 23% of the total population. However, only 7% of college employees and only 2 of the 20 college governors are of Asian Heritage. We recognise that the categories of Muslim and Asian Heritage should not be conflated.

3.3 THE COLLEGE AS AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING COMMUNITY

The Foster Review (2005) acknowledged that FE is the main provider of post-16 learning for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Across the UK one third of people with mental health problems have no qualifications and of those that do, only a third have a qualification at GCSE level. Against this background, one of our case study colleges has developed an extensive inclusive learning policy which, the Principal argues, *'permeates the whole organization'*. In particular, this policy is designed to provide a fully integrated approach to students with learning difficulties and disabilities. Seeking to promote mental health through learning, this college has invested significantly in extending access for those with disabilities. Its 'Social Inclusion Unit' is also involved in pre- and post-16 programmes designed to re-engage learners, linking with Education Action Zones, Education Otherwise and the Probation Service.

Since 1999 the college has invested increasing resources to support people with learning difficulties and mental health problems in the community to prepare them to enter college and to gain educational qualifications. Across the college there are now over 120 part-time 'inclusive learning officers' (ILOs) who provide tutoring and mentoring in a variety of situations. They work in the community to support the learning of disabled students and those with learning difficulties. Seven inclusive learning mentors guide and advise the ILOs. Inevitably this work involves college staff in co-ordinating and partnering with many other external organizations across the borough, such as NHS trusts, clinical psychologists, occupational therapists, psychiatric and community nurses, drug abuse units, private hospitals, mental health units and services, drop-in centres, hearing impaired and visually impaired services, rehabilitation units etc.

The college's work in this area has had such an impact on the local community that it was recently highlighted in a government document published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. It began in hospitals and infirmaries with therapeutic courses like creative writing, art and craft work, taught by college staff from the art therapy work team. Typically, this support then continues after patients have been discharged from hospital, when they may need someone to link with in the community, especially if they are on strong medication. While this work began in an informal way supporting service users in the community, it is now an established formal educational component of the college. The inclusive learning team provides assessment and additional support to any learner on any college programme of study because of, for example a learning difficulty, a sensory impairment, a physical disability or a mental health difficulty. All entry and foundation level courses in the college have an inclusive learning officer (ILO) in the class.

Following the formulation of 'an additional support plan', the service provides individualised support strategies (as well as specialist equipment like laptops and software packages that incorporate Braille facilities). The ILO team are trained to help students decide what support they need, provide learning support in and outside the classroom, arrange specialist assessments, work with teaching staff to support student learning, help students apply for disabled allowance, follow up if students are absent from college and facilitate students who need help when taking examinations. Mental health officers organise 'taster days' to build up student confidence, meet them personally at enrolment (in order to help with any anxiety that the student may experience), then meet with students on a monthly basis during their course, undertake three reviews per year, liase with tutors if a student becomes ill, and can even provide personal support during examinations (for example, sitting next to students to re-assure them).

In 2004-05 the ILO team supported a total of 948 students in the community and the college. Indeed many students disclose both a learning difficulty and a disability, or more than one disability. The kind of difficulties these students have to deal with are outlined in the following box:

Learning Difficulty

Moderate learning difficulties	284
Severe learning difficulties	14
Dyslexia	197
Dyscalculia	2
Other specific learning difficulties	170
Other	330

By Disability

Visual impairment	76
Hearing impairment	102
Disability affecting mobility	172
Other physical disability	49
Other medical condition	382
Emotions/behavioural difficulties	23
Mental ill health	185
Temporary disability	15
Multiple disabilities	18
Other	70

At the time of the research (2005-06) more than 200 adults (who suffer a range of mental health problems, from mild panic through to bipolar, schizophrenia and self-harm) attend accredited courses at this specific college. In so far as many of these students suffer from low self-esteem, anxiety or depression, college courses (from computers to ceramics) can facilitate and improve their long-term recovery. The college has now built-in structures to support students if they do relapse. Many of these students have to cope with the inter-related problems of severe financial difficulties, lapses in mental health and physical difficulties due to ill health.

The support offered by the college provides these students with encouragement and confidence, enables them to socialise with others, makes them feel part of society, builds self-esteem and enhances the role of their carers. The college provides someone outside the family network who can discuss problems they may be experiencing with academic requirements. As the chief support tutor explained,

'To me it's very rewarding when you see people moving on with their lives. For example, one student suffering very low self-esteem is now at university studying to become a social worker.'

Here are a few examples of the positive impact of the college's inclusive learning initiative on members of the local community who suffer with learning difficulties and disabilities.

The Voice of the Learner (1)

David studied for A levels but became ill in his early twenties which prevented him from going on to a degree course, as he explained, *'My illness came on very suddenly. I did not know where I was and I was in hospital for nearly a year. My recovery took a very long time.'* After some years at home David started to attend a local drop-in centre for people with mental health difficulties. The 'new start' programmes had just begun and David felt able to do a short course in computing. *'The tutor was excellent. He made me feel at ease straight away and I started thinking about what I should be doing to catch up on the time I had lost.'* The deputy manager of the centre introduced David to a member of College staff who came to teach creative writing. A meeting with the head of Art and Design was then arranged and this quickly turned into an interview as David produced two portfolios of drawings. He was accepted immediately for the two year access course in Art and Design, *'I would not have had the confidence to do this on my own. I just needed the support to make that first step into college, but the fact that they were so impressed with my work made me feel good about myself.'*

The Voice of the Learner (2)

'The college has provided me with a lifeline. I would not be in education at all if I had not started my learning in the community to build the confidence to go to the main college for courses. The support I receive from the college is excellent. The fact that The Inclusive Learning Team are there makes me more confident too. There is always someone to help. The mentoring service has also really helped me. I can discuss issues privately and can organise support with my tutor. She has provided me with a lot of advice about courses and career options too. Tutors can help with course fees and sorting out funding. On benefits you only have to pay a fraction of the cost for courses. I was quite worried that most students would be very young but there are a lot of adults studying at college. In two years I have studied GCSE in English literature and have just taken A.S. level English. I plan to continue with English and sign up for psychology as well.'

The Voice of the Learner (3)

Ann could not wait to leave school. After divorce and being left to bring up her two children alone she suffered a deep depression. Her local community psychiatric nurse supported her through her illness and, as she made a gradual recovery, her nurse suggested she join a college course to get to know other people in the community. *'The first time I went to a course I sat in the corner and felt too embarrassed to speak.'* Ann was in the fortunate position of having a very supportive head teacher and deputy at her son's school. They encouraged Ann and others in the area to use the adult group room at the school and the college offered a tutor for creative writing courses. The writing group worked on a portfolio of work and the tutor made contact with the reader in residence for the borough libraries who invited the six members to hold readings at local venues. At college Ann has now successfully completed her first year in Special Education. She now feels more in control of her future, *'the head teacher provided me with work experience to support in the classroom and he has now just offered me work as a classroom assistant.'*

Similarly at another case study college a mature student with mental health problems has been extremely successful. When he enrolled on a 'Stepping Stone's' course for motor vehicle maintenance five years ago he lacked confidence and lived at home with his parents. He is now studying for a foundation degree, is widely considered a 'model student', has won the college 'Student of the Year award' and regularly mentors other students. He also now lives independently in his own apartment.

This kind of engagement with disadvantaged members of the community reflects and reinforces a core contribution of the FE sector. The colleges we have researched put great store in providing students with another opportunity to learn and develop, especially for

those who might otherwise be lost to education. Precisely this kind of community engagement is also evident in colleges' adult and community learning provision.

3.4 THE COLLEGE AS A PROVIDER OF ADULT AND COMMUNITY LEARNING

All our case study colleges have an extensive adult and community learning provision. This is a very important way they reach out into the community. FE colleges have long histories of providing education and training locally. Expressing a primary commitment to make courses accessible to everyone, colleges invest heavily in 'College in the Community' provision. Respondents in all the colleges we have researched have emphasised the importance of adult and community learning. They have repeatedly argued that this 'lifelong learning' provision provides students with a second chance and in some cases a third chance to succeed in the education system. It is widely recognised that not all students are mature enough to take advantage of formal education opportunities when they are 16 years old. As many interviewees have explained, different students become '*ready to learn*' at different stages of their lives.

Particularly since the Kennedy report in the late 1990s advocating the need to 'widen participation' all colleges have sort to engage with the poorest members of the local community. The Divisional Manager for Community Provision at one FE college in the North West of England explained that,

'There is a huge basic skills need in this town. There is a 40% literacy and numeracy problem. The College retains a strong commitment to widening participation, but the government has changed the goal posts so we have to bob and weave. We have now had to link our programme to 'the skills for life' agenda. We have already raised expectations in the local community so every change the Government comes up with, we've been forced to find ways around it! We have to spend a lot of time redefining courses to fit current government agendas which are always changing and always short-term.'

Much of this provision is designed to reach students who would be too intimidated to enter an FE college but who may be willing to attend their local community centre, school or church hall, where the environment is more familiar and less threatening, as the divisional manager elaborated,

'Many of our adult students have had a bad experience at school and some will not walk back in through the door, they feel so traumatised. Many students will go to a neighbourhood centre or a high school but they will not walk across the college doorstep. They are just too anxious. These are the people in the community we prepare for college, who might come to us later, otherwise they would never come back to education.'

Intended to be accessible and flexible, these courses enable people to study part-time or full-time during the day or in the evening. Students are encouraged to recognise that staff are skilled and friendly, that learning and education is not intimidating and that *'people like you can do it!'* In promotional material colleges emphasise that courses are for people of all ages, backgrounds and academic abilities, from introductory levels through to degrees, from GCSEs (level 2) to A levels (level 3) to vocational qualifications, BTEC qualifications, GNVQs, NVQs AVCs, HNCs, HNDs, professional qualifications (for example accountancy, computing and marketing) through to foundation degrees, honours degrees, etc.

People 'returning to study' are particularly encouraged so that they can improve career prospects, update basic skills, gain entry to higher education, achieve a professional qualification etc. Indeed many FE students do repeatedly return to college. At different stages of their lives, at different ages they return for further tuition, training and education. The knowledge base of the college is very applied which encourages local people to return to education. Participating in these courses helps students to accumulate 'practical' skills that they can readily appreciate will directly help them in their daily lives and in improving their career prospects.

At one of our case study colleges courses are offered in partnership with more than 100 out-reach community centres and schools (often termed 'partnership centres') as well as in the various buildings and campus locations that comprise the College itself. The college also has 14 partner high schools and they deliver various courses like GCSEs, level 1 and 2 and vocational courses. The Divisional Manager explained,

'We offer numerous courses that are accredited by the National Council for Further Education. Our ultimate goal is to get students studying in the community onto a course here at college. We have a conversion rate of 25% of ACL students transferring onto college courses. Some of these students are on their 2nd and even 3rd chance at education. We attract a large cross section of people across the borough. We get university degree people plus people with nothing, the very poorest in the community.'

In some cases courses are free. Others offer concessionary rates. One ACL manager described the management of the programmes,

'If we can get 12 students we will run a course anywhere and at any time so long as the tutors are comfortable with the location. We have 60 part-time teaching staff and I communicate with them and our centre managers in the schools mainly by email. Many of our tutors have a day job as well as their part-time evening work. We have partnership meetings with the schools where

we discuss audit issues and changes to the curriculum. Sometimes they do not realise the pressure we are under with auditing and inspection. They think the college is cracking the whip unreasonably. But all the time we are coming up against government short-termism.'

For many of our research respondents ACL programmes are a very important way that the FE sector seeks to address poverty and disadvantage in the local community.

However, recent government funding cuts appear to be jeopardising this central FE mission. Colleges across the UK have been required to make large-scale cuts in their adult education budgets. As a consequence, many classes will have to be cancelled and staff will be made redundant during 2006. Colleges have also had to increase fees. Research respondents believe that these reductions in funding are likely to threaten the whole programme of adult and community learning, as one Principal explained,

'We're currently doing £1 million pounds worth of work for adult education as we were encouraged to do. But now the LSC and the government have told us we've got to drop these courses. We've got to cut £1 million pounds worth of work. But adult education gives people a second or third chance. It brings in people who might not be mature enough at 16 to cope with formal education. Education now seems to be just about middle class kids and everyone else is secondary.'

This specific college is also highly committed to widening participation to target potential learners from disadvantaged geographical areas and non-traditional groups. However with these cuts in its ACL budget, staff emphasise that a key element of the college's contribution to the community is being significantly weakened.

Many research respondents have argued that current funding policies and mechanisms are also exacerbating class divisions in education. FE staff are highly critical of the recent announcement that ACL has to be cutback whilst funding is more focussed on 16-18 year olds. Employees argue that this intensifies inequalities, as the following statements demonstrate,

'The LSC agenda is the 16-18 year olds, that's where they are throwing all the money. I understand that this is important but we also know the importance of educating adults in the community. Education may not be the solution to everything but it can do an awful lot. It's a challenge but community education should be a huge part of what the college does.'

'Cutting the adult education budget like they're now doing is a big problem. A lot of young people are just not ready to learn. Educating adults leads to an enriched and enhanced community.'

'What colleges can do in the community is enrich people's lives. We are operating in a very deprived area. We have massive potential to improve people's daily lives in the community. There's a lot of potential that we can't unlock at the moment. We have a duty to serve our community and the college is well-placed to do this.'

Our research respondents believe that withholding funding in relation to adult learners is particularly damaging to the FE sector mission. According to NIACE (in their response to the Foster Review), eight in ten learners engaged in the FE sector are adults, 50% of taught learning hours are for adults, and two in three of the jobs of the next decade will be filled by adults.

Many FE Colleges are at the forefront of social and community problems, inequalities and poverty. The colleges we have researched are situated in disadvantaged areas and have to deal on a daily basis with these issues. In the case of one college that competes in the local area with two local sixth form centres, the Principal observed,

'They say that for students to get into the local 6th form centre, they need 5 grade Bs and their parents need to drive a Range Rover!'[6]

He argued that, because these 6th form centres enrol predominantly middle class children,

'Year on year they are getting an increase in funding while we get less year on year. Funding is based on the principle of "the more qualifications you do as a college, the more money you get." So the more middle class kids you enrol, the more money you get. Kids who are struggling, who only sit one or two exams, you don't get funding. This is a class-based approach to funding. The government can't see it. They won't listen to this argument.'

'The difference in funding between an FE student and a University student is incredible. If that's the way it's going to be they should say it. But they don't. They try to insinuate it's the college's fault. They reduce our funding then try to blame us.'

The precarious nature of funding can also erode a sense of community in the college, as another Principal acknowledged,

'Government funding is concentrating on 16-18 year olds. For FE this is a very difficult environment to work in. It's very hard to motivate people who may be sacked next year. In some cases the people have been here for 20 years and

6. FE colleges provide more vocational courses such as hairdressing and car maintenance and these can require extensive investment in facilities and resources.

they know they may have to go with just the standard redundancy terms. One of the big problems for FE is that the government and the majority of people in government, and who influence government, have never been near an FE college in their life.'

Cutting adult education funding also impacts on the inclusive learning unit. While courses for people with learning disabilities were free, the cost of sitting exams and materials can be prohibitive for some students, as one lecturer explained,

'If the exam costs £40 and they have a weekly income of £80 and are on income support, they can't pay it, it's as simple as that. The same issue arises with catering courses and health and beauty. Uniforms and materials can cost a great deal of money. If someone is trying to learn then they should be supported. In the case of X without the support he received, he would be back in hospital now. So these cuts are not only a false economy, for some students they can be the difference between continuing on their course or not.'

'The government is now putting all the emphasis on 16 to 19 year olds. We have a lot of adult returners who currently do not have to pay. Those women coming back, who left school have now got kids, there are so many good stories about how a return to education leads to better things especially for these young women. This area is highly deprived, we need to do everything we can to lift people out of poverty. The government has got it wrong.'

The foregoing sections provide some examples highlighting a number of different aspects of college community engagement (student learning, social inclusion, inclusive learning and adult and community learning). These illustrate the important role in the local community that the FE colleges perform. Another very significant aspect of community engagement is colleges' extensive involvement with local companies. Employers often recruit direct from colleges, they sometimes sponsor students and programmes and provide other resources (e.g. match funding initiatives), advise on training requirements (e.g. in engineering) and may also provide tutors for practical courses like motor vehicle maintenance. In addition, we have found cases where colleges play a lead role in constructing new employer-related communities. For example, one of our case study colleges hosts 'The Sizzle Creative Industry Network'. Providing a forum for creative businesses across the region, this private-public partnership has established a substantial local network attracting companies from the creative industries, members of the local council, the Arts Council, the North West Development Agency, the County and Borough Councils and two local universities. This case illustrates how the leadership of FE colleges can facilitate important learning-based community initiatives designed to regenerate local economies. These relationships between FE colleges and local employers require further research.

FE community engagement can also be more hidden and less visible, as the following two examples illustrate. All the colleges we have researched have catering divisions. These include a public restaurant where silver service lunches (and in some cases evening meals) are served and these are open to members of the local community. The restaurant provides a 'learning by doing' experience for the college students, who are able to appreciate the issues of serving 'real life', paying customers, whilst still learning within the college environment. This constitutes an excellent opportunity for students to learn skills in a practical and applied setting. Many of these college customers are senior citizens/OAPs who are provided with a high quality meal at a very economical price in a pleasant setting. This facility also gives them the opportunity to interact with the younger generation of people, as one of the diners explained to us:

'I love coming here. It's a day out for me. You get a very good meal for a really affordable price and the waiters and waitresses are very efficient and pleasant. It is also nice to see the college. When you see the youngsters in college it does break down the barriers between the generations. I am a widow and before I started coming here with some friends I had no idea what the college did. I even see some of the girls and boys outside college and I can say hello to them. I would never have done that before. I was quite nervous of groups of young people after my husband died.'

Hair and beauty departments are also open to the public. Colleges invite members of the public in to use their services. As customers they can take advantage of the highly skilled services on offer, whilst paying a fraction of the market price. In return the students acquire excellent 'real life' experience. Health and Beauty departments also engage in numerous outreach activities. In one department staff who teach anatomy and physiology provide treatments for patients, nurses and carers in the oncology department of the local hospital. They provide nurses with massage as a way of helping them deal with stress. In college, staff teach students in classes with ages ranging from 14 to 70 plus. They teach 16-19 year olds NVQ beauty programmes, holistic part-time programmes and Foundation degrees. They also lecture on retirement courses.

Girls aged 14 attend college and are taught personal presentation, industrial awareness and make-up. Staff in the health and beauty centre go into schools and work with primary school children. Here they train teachers to make children less hostile. Staff in the department emphasised the numerous benefits for students of studying on these programmes,

> *'Education is not just about what you learn on the course. Some kids who come to us have no idea about how to present themselves, how to dress smart and in a way that is acceptable to the world of business.'*

> *'The Hair and Beauty course can be a really good area for students. Even if they don't go into the industry, they learn lots of transferable skills about dealing with customers, interpersonal skills, high standards of self-presentation. You can see them gaining much more confidence and that will stand them in good stead for other careers, for example, like reception work, the airlines or working in retail.'*

Alongside their normal working hours, staff regularly volunteer to run 'pamper days' on Saturdays (which include beauty treatments, hairdressing and massage). By working in the evenings and on Saturdays, staff sacrifice their time to make links with the community and present a positive and inviting image of the college. They also supervise students who, in order to gain experience, work at no cost for clients from the local community.

A course manager for holistic therapies and foundation degrees explained,

> *'We take our students out of these fours walls. We go to all sorts of events, to garden centres -plants and aromatherapy go hand in hand! - cancer care units, field trips to France. This summer I'm teaching teenage pregnant mums, retirement groups and difficult kids.'*

A divisional manager explained,

> *'There's a lot more going on here than just health and beauty. The government does not understand what FE colleges do. It really annoys me. We do so much for the local community, yet we then get judged on retention!'*

Another manager stated that measuring performance through retention figures was extremely paradoxical, as she observed, *'In some cases this results in success being redefined as failure.'* Many students find jobs in the local hair and beauty salons before they actually complete the full programme of the course, as one lecturer explained,

'The Government wants us to give people the skills to get a job. However, if we do this, but they just happen to get a job after completing three quarters of the course, we are penalised! What should we do? Try to stop the student getting employed just so we can fit the Governments criteria! Apparently it is a real problem for the staff who teach plastering. They tell me that as soon as they have taught a student how to plaster round a corner, they can get a job so they leave the course.'

These comments illustrate a theme developed in an earlier paper (Collinson ad Collinson 2005b) that questioned current performance assessment criteria embedded in the audit culture that pervades the FE sector. These criteria may not only produce important contradictory consequences, but may also define successful performance as failure.

4. Engaging Communities and the Challenge for FE Leadership

The foregoing data illustrate the diversity of FE college community engagements. In many cases this engagement in practice blurs the boundaries between what constitutes 'internal' and 'external' communities. For example, students and staff are simultaneously situated both within the college (in their formal roles) and outside the college (e.g. as citizens, consumers and parents). Hence these boundaries between communities are rather fluid, as one head of department observed,

> *'The staff working in the college are also part of the community they serve. In college we see our students developing from being unskilled to acquiring jobs and improving their lives within the community.'*

When we locate FE leadership relations and practices within the various communities that are their condition and consequence, we begin to appreciate some of the challenges faced by those seeking to engage multiple internal and external communities with their porous, flexible and interdependent boundaries, their overlapping layers, and shifting sources of influence and negotiation. Indeed different communities could need to be addressed in quite distinct ways. While students might need a clear disciplinary code, quite different influence strategies may be needed when seeking to secure the consent of governors, employers and local community leaders.

This section now considers a number of inter-related challenges for FE leadership of this extensive community engagement. In particular, we examine the implications for FE leadership of: (1) multiple communities, (2) funding and assessment and (3) leadership succession.

4.1 MULTIPLE COMMUNITIES AND BLENDED LEADERSHIP

A key challenge for leadership is to interact effectively with multiple communities in ways that are not only mutually-beneficial, but also retain a balance between these diverse engagements. In an earlier working paper, 'Blended Leadership', we examined staff's perceptions of what constitutes effective leadership. One of the factors employees highlighted in research interviews was that effective FE leaders need to attend to **both** external **and** internal communities (broadly defined) and to do so in mutually-reinforcing ways. This paper highlighted the value of leaders in FE retaining a 'blended' approach, one that incorporates a balanced engagement with **both** 'external' **and** 'internal' communities. Our findings suggested that if leaders become overly pre-occupied with **either** their external **or** their internal role, privileging one above the other, then problems can emerge.

Our research also suggests that the degree of emphasis on internal or external communities (broadly defined) can also vary, not only between colleges, but also, and quite markedly over time, within the same college. Frequently this shifting emphasis is shaped by the college leadership of the day. At one highly successful college, for example, longstanding employees described three very distinct leadership regimes under which they had worked over the past 20 years. Prioritising international contacts and partnerships, the Principal and his senior management team in the late 1980s and early 1990s sort to attract students from countries like China, Nigeria and India. By contrast, the governors asked the next Principal (appointed in the mid 1999s) to develop the college's contribution to the local community. One colleague stated, *'He didn't leave the town for the first three years!'* The local approach of this Principal was highly successful in driving up college performance (particularly as defined by inspection). After he retired, the college appointed a woman Principal. She is widely seen as adopting a blended leadership approach that seeks to combine and balance a concern with **both** internal **and** external communities.

This discussion also illustrates another vital community engagement for FE colleges. As important employers in the local area, colleges make a significant contribution to their (external) communities. Equally as employers, they seek to sustain a sense of (internal) community for their staff. Colleges typically comprise multiple sub-cultures, working in different faculties, divisions, departments and sections. For example, the predominantly feminine (female-dominated) culture of hair and beauty contrasts sharply with the heavily masculine (male-dominated) cultures of engineering and/or motor vehicle maintenance. Departments frequently operate in different buildings dispersed around the town in which the college is situated, reinforcing both their embeddedness in the local community and the multiplicity of their sub-cultures. The multi-site nature of many colleges can lead some staff to feel isolated from the main campus.

As we outlined in 'Blended Leadership', many staff in FE view effective leadership as combining delegation/distribution with direction/decisive decision-making. This kind of approach can respect and enhance the autonomy and discretion of the faculties and departments whilst also reinforcing the wider culture and community of the whole college. Certainly, delegation blended with direction is central to the leadership approach and the culture of the FE colleges (we have researched). A strong sense of community is likely to be a condition and consequence of this kind of blended approach.

4.2 FUNDING AND ASSESSMENT

As the Principal's statement at the beginning of this paper makes clear, many FE interviewees feel strongly that funding mechanisms and financial controls (based primarily in London) result in decision making that is largely insensitive to local community needs and aspirations. Indeed many research respondents emphasise that current funding, auditing and inspection processes frequently weaken or erode colleges' capacity to engage with their respective communities.[7] When colleges are audited and inspected in rigid and inflexible ways and controlled by financial cuts, how can those in senior positions make links with what are often diverse and disparate communities?

As funding and inspections currently operate, there may indeed be important disincentives to engage with external communities. Such engagements are inevitably time-consuming and demanding and their results may not emerge immediately or feed into (short-term-focussed) inspections, audits and assessments. The previous discussion about current cuts in adult and community learning provide a stark illustration of how funding mechanisms can directly erode a central mission of FE colleges. We also discussed the cases from health and beauty and plastering where students sometimes move into well-paid positions before completing their courses. While this can be deemed a success for students and colleges (in terms of employability), when retention is prioritised as a key performance indicator, there is a real danger of success being redefined as failure. This also highlights the tendency for performance criteria and targets in FE to conflict with and contradict one another.

4.3. LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION

In an earlier paper, we argued that an important effect of audit and inspection saturation, of highly inconsistent funding and of frequent financial cuts was the intensification of a leadership succession crisis in FE (Collinson and Collinson 2005b). These pressures make the position of Principal less attractive. Several Principals have commented on the sharp reduction in the number of applicants they have observed for specific Principal posts around the country, as one Principal observed,

> *'It's a barmy world in FE. Don't get me wrong, I love my job but it's not a good job, having to sack people, being at the whim of the LSC...you'd have to be crazy to take this lot on!'*

7. Interviewees have also argued that the evaluation of college performance frequently does not take context into account. Colleges located in wealthier communities are likely to enrol students more focussed on education and examination results than ones in more disadvantaged areas.

Our research suggests that the demands of engaging multiple communities may further contribute to this reduction in leadership applications from qualified candidates. In the context of contradictory performance measures, the need to interact with multiple communities can significantly increase the pressure on college staff and especially those in leadership positions. To some of those we have interviewed in the sector, the sheer enormity of the Principal's role is perceived as problematic, as one 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.'

In one Principal's view the status and rewards of the Principal position need to be significantly improved,

'To attract high quality recruits into the Principal's job they need to pay much higher salaries and this needs to be performance-related. They also need to make sure a significant number of college principals get honours from the queen. They need to ensure that success is recognised and rewarded. At the moment it is poorly paid and we get blamed for everything!'

In sum, our research on communities of leadership in FE highlights several inter-related challenges. In particular, it raises questions about engaging multiple communities, the impact of funding and about the likely availability of a pool of talented leaders for the future.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has outlined the multiplicity and diversity of communities in FE. It identifies an important reciprocal and interdependent relationship between FE colleges and their local communities. Our research argues that FE colleges make a significant contribution to the economic, social and psychological well-being of the communities in which they operate. We have outlined a number of examples from our research where this community engagement has generated very positive outcomes, improving the lives of students, facilitating creativity and enhancing communities.

The paper also argues that these multiple community engagements are an important condition and consequence of leadership in FE. While multiple and diverse communities are very important for leadership, conversely, leadership processes are also significant for constructing and shaping the development of communities. These reciprocal relationships frequently appear to be under-estimated and under-valued by those assessing college performance and those responsible for formulating national FE policy.

Our research also highlights several inter-related challenges for FE leadership. It raises questions about engaging multiple communities, the impact of funding and leadership succession. Against this background, and in the light of this focus on the relationship between community and leadership, we now conclude with a series of recommendations.

1. Acknowledge and Value the Role of FE in Engaging Communities.

Many of the staff we have interviewed argue that important aspects of colleges' role in the community remain invisible or undervalued, particularly by those who evaluate performance and decide on funding. They feel that their contribution is not recognised. There needs to be greater appreciation of colleges' extensive community role. This is particularly important given the current government's concern to encourage the FE sector to contribute to its 'skill agenda' plans for a more skilled and competitive workforce by developing a more coherent 14-19 agenda, widening participation and improving basic adult skills. This emphasis also highlights the importance of context. How colleges and communities inter-connect is likely to vary according to specific contexts. Our research has found very diverse community initiatives in the different colleges we have studied.

2. Develop the Strategic Relationship between Colleges and Communities.

Our research suggests that the FE sector already engages with local communities in multiple ways. A greater awareness and understanding of community leadership could further enhance student learning and achievement (broadly defined). It would be useful to explore how these positive partnerships with local communities could be enhanced, for example, to examine how more sophisticated outreach strategies could be developed. Colleges have a significant contribution to make in their role as community leaders.

3. Re-Think the Nature of Leadership in FE.

This working paper indicates the need to re-think the nature of (effective) leadership in the FE sector. Our research suggests that FE leadership may be much more about collaboration, co-operation and facilitation, about brokering and co-ordination, enhancing interdependence and developing reciprocity within and between communities. This much broader view of FE leadership emphasises the importance of engaging strategically and skilfully with multiple communities. It focuses on leaders as facilitators of continuous improvement, on their ability to act with others, share power and responsibility through 'moral purpose' and by creating 'a community of learners'. Equally, it suggests that a blended leadership approach may be particularly effective in the FE sector. Many staff in FE view effective leadership as combining distribution with direction, delegation with decisive decision-making. This kind of leadership approach can respect and enhance the autonomy and discretion of specific communities whilst also reinforcing the wider culture of the whole college. In the colleges we have researched delegation blended with direction appears to be central to effective FE leadership.

4. Critically Analyse the Effects of Funding, Auditing and Inspection.

Our research raises questions about to the extent to which current, contradictory performance assessment practices produce unintended effects that weaken community leadership in the sector. We need to know more about how far performance evaluations (unintentionally) cut across and discourage community initiatives by FE colleges and, conversely, in what ways alternative assessment processes might facilitate positive partnerships and reward community leadership.

5. Develop Leadership Skills and Strategies of Community Engagement.

Our research highlights the potential benefits of developing more effective FE-based strategies for community engagement. For example, CEL teaching programmes could give greater emphasis to the development of community-based leadership skills. These findings also suggest that specific programmes designed to develop community leadership (and social entrepreneurship) could be extremely helpful. This could include the sharing of current best practice, the identification and development of specific skills, experience and knowledge about community-based leadership strategies and about working with community groups.

6. Building Bridges Between Colleges

Despite the pressure for colleges to compete with one another (and with sixth forms), our research has found several examples of effective collaboration between colleges and particularly between Principals. We have discovered examples of communities of Principals (typically in proximate colleges) meeting to share experience, good practice and strategic vision. These Principals have strongly emphasised to us the value of such professional networks. As Foster (2005) also argued, there is a great potential here for such communities between colleges to be encouraged and extended.

7. Building Communities Between Leadership Colleges

Finally, we suggest that it could also be helpful for CEL to strengthen its links and networks with other leadership colleges, particularly those recently established within the UK education sector, such as the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. This building of communities across different organizations directly concerned with various areas of education and leadership could facilitate the sharing of good practice and new ideas about leadership processes. The NCSL, for example, has already developed a 'leadership community strategy' that seeks to build communities across four areas: (1) within organizations, (2) between organizations, (3) between schools and communities and (4) in a multi-agency context.

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Further Contacts and Information

This Working Paper Series is part of the dissemination of a research project designed to investigate a critical area that is frequently neglected: the relationship between leaders and followers in the post-16 sector. A central concern of the research is to locate leadership in its FE/post-16 context and to highlight the key 'leadership challenges' faced by the staff in the sector. The findings draw on research interviews conducted at all levels from Principals to students. An important assumption informing the project is that leadership is a shared process, shaping practices across various organizational levels.

The research is designed to explore important issues such as the extent to which leadership is distributed throughout the organisation; the impact on staff in dealing with the on-going changes within the sector; and the importance of positive feedback from leaders. Our research has also thrown up significant questions about the role of the Learning and Skills Council in managing the sector, the contradictions inherent within the funding regimes for colleges and the tensions between funding regimes and the Government's policy of extending access.

There are also another three published Working Papers in this series which will give you an insight into our initial findings:

1. Leader-led Relations in Context

This paper highlights the importance of context for issues of leadership and also

a. identifies the preferred leadership style within the sector

b. the key motivators for staff, and

c. highlights the commitment and professionalism of staff within the sector.

2. Leadership Challenges

This paper identifies the significant pressures that have to be absorbed by staff at all levels of the colleges. This paper concludes with a series of recommendations to Government designed to assist colleges when facing these challenges.

3. 'Blended Leadership: Employee Perspectives on Effective Leadership in the UK FE Sector',

This paper builds on the work of our first two working papers, (Leader-Led Relations in Context and Leadership Challenges), and focuses on what constitutes effective leadership from the perspective of FE staff. Blended Leadership is an approach that combines specific elements of traditional hierarchical leadership with more contemporary aspects of distributed leadership. Our research has found that FE staff prefer leadership practices that provide structure, clarity and organisation as well as team-working, communication and a shared sense of mission, and accomplishment. Our research has also found that, within the FE sector, this form of 'blended leadership' is routinely accomplished in the context of multiple, conflicting and contradictory demands.

The research has been sponsored by the Department of Education and Skills (DfES), to whom we will be reporting the final results of the project in March 2006. In the meantime we would be very pleased to receive any comments or suggestions in relation to the initial findings or any aspect you think is relevant to the research. All responses will be treated in the **strictest confidence**. In line with research policy (as demonstrated in the working papers), no institution or individuals will be named in the final report. If you wish to participate, please contact:

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