1. What if the further education and skills sector became a genuinely self-improving system with the trust and capacity to determine its own future?

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Introduction

The further education and skills (FES) sector in England continues to prove itself flexible and adaptive to the many and changing demands made of it. Its position at the overlap between formal schooling, vocational education, plus, in some cases, higher level academic study, has left it exposed to competing models of quality assurance and, in turn, attenuated models of quality improvement. This paper explores and imagines three "what if" responses to quality improvement which together could create a strong platform for establishing FE as a more widely recognised self-improving system. Building self-improvement inevitably requires clarity about where improvements are needed and can make most difference.

We need a 'trigger alert' here – performance in the system is of course normally distributed: some providers excel, some struggle and the majority do neither. A self-sustaining approach to quality improvement needs to transform that profile so the rest approach the best. So for brevity and readability in what follows, we will be making assertions at system level in the confident knowledge they do not apply to all providers all the time.

The internal impact of external shininess

The FE and skills sector's niche in the education ecosystem has the providers attempting to reconcile the very different expectations of employers (effectively commercial service purchasers), public sector regulators/funders and

students. To satisfy the quality requirements of the former, providers adopted procedural compliance style QA systems of the ISO 9000 [1] variety which accredit self-evaluation based on detailed, documented adherence to process. The current system regulators, however, place little value on this and prefer to rely on a model of periodic external inspection by 'experts' (ie Ofsted). Both approaches factor in learner outcomes even though these are too complex to make sense of in aggregate; the form in which they are assessed/measured for accountability purposes. A significant number of FES providers vehemently dispute the relevance of the Ofsted approach and the expertise of its inspectors; a challenge which has become more strident as the different flavours of the inspection framework have converged on the school-focused variant. [2]

Colleges and providers feel strongly that they operate in a hotly contested competitive environment and have evolved polished professional marketing strategies to deal with it. The purpose of the marketing message is to communicate a story of success and any public admission of a flaw is seen as a sign of weakness competitors will exploit. Naturally, compliance is policed and more open exploration is discouraged. For example, a particular research and development project involving a dozen colleges led by the 157 Group, RSA and CUREE included a mid-point seminar bringing together the local co-ordinators to review and share progress for some formative feedback. Despite the restricted audience and formative purpose, many of the local co-ordinators had to get senior management approval for the specific terms in which they reported their project to their peers.

Understandable as this approach may be, it has a substantial downside. This glossy marketing disposition becomes more than just a public stance; it affects the internal dynamic of the sector, engendering a widespread difficulty in acknowledging and exploring challenges and areas for improvement. It ceases to be safe for providers and most of the practitioners within them to recognise and probe weakness. This wounds the sector; a system which is unable to disclose and discuss problems is unable to address them. A self-improving system has to recognise that there is something to improve and take the opportunity to understand it in depth. Similarly, practitioners have to be able critically to review their personal and collective teaching, learning and assessment efforts to identify areas for development and to propose or seek advice on how they can be improved. To do that they need to work in a system that values such review and analysis.

What if the sector replaced its marketing glossiness with a more confident and assertive openness about its weaknesses and what it's doing to address them? What if it seized these as opportunities to deepen practice and strengthen the system publicly? Making public the acknowledgment and exploration of weaknesses has many virtues. Inviting in external critique smacks of confidence and makes it easier to hear and act on challenges. Testing and disturbing the status quo by welcoming the reviews of outsiders helps us all to move forward. Greater openness also, perhaps paradoxically helps us earn and secure the trust of the wider community. It is the refusal to stagnate or be seen as complacent, not a set of polished results, that helps

1.   ISO (2009, 2011, 2015) ISO 9000 – Quality management. [online] Available at: http://www.iso.org/iso/home/standards/management-standards/iso_9000.htm

2.   For instance, this commentary in *FE Week*: Hatton, P. (2016) Chief Inspector should look closer to home for poor performance. *FE Week*, [online] 25 January. Available at: http://feweek.co.uk/2016/01/25/chief-inspector-should-look-closer-to-home-for-poor-performance/

exceptional providers and indeed whole sectors be seen as sufficiently self-improving to escape from or move beyond inspectorial models of quality assurance and improvement.

The leadership of learning

Even though most FE providers (and many other training organisations) have become, in effect, not-for-profit businesses, they would, if challenged, assert that their business continues to be the provision of education/training opportunities (and/or the enhancement of their learners' life chances). But there are tensions that pull in opposite directions. Over the 25 years that the sector has existed in roughly its current form, the number of providers has reduced; mostly though merger and consolidation. Providers, particularly colleges, are larger and are in practice conglomerates with diverse and heterogeneous portfolios. At the same time, the top executive team has tended to reduce in number, to become more professionally focused on the business dimensions of the enterprise and to become increasingly remote from the teaching, learning and assessment activities which are the heart of the business.

Meanwhile, in the divisions/faculties/departments of the organisation, teachers/trainers are grappling with the twin demands of being good teachers and of being current and knowledgeable about their subject/vocation. These two strands are equally important (as noted in, for instance, the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning [CAVTL] report *It's about work…*) but have become separated in many providers. We found, for instance in our pilot study conducted with the 157 Group[3] that:

> "… vocational and pedagogic domains are rarely brought effectively together in college CPDL support. Vocationally related CPDL seems to be held in higher regard by many practitioners and its delivery is often embedded in local (ie faculty) systems. Teaching and learning development, by contrast, is often a 'corporate' initiative, centrally delivered. Too many of the participants (and, it has to be said, some of their leaders) are willing to settle for a directive approach focused on behaviours which staff experience as 'tips and tricks' superficiality."

What if leadership at every level in the sector was intently focused on enhancing quality and depth in vocational learning and achievement? The first thing they would reach for is more and better evidence about what makes a difference. Right now leaders, practitioners and everyone in between suffer from a lack of evidence about effective teaching and learning practice in the sector. The formal published research on further education is slight (certainly in comparison to the school and higher education systems) and has tended to focus on the problem rather than the solution; on the labour market economics interests of government departments. The expanding body of more substantial and in-depth evidence about developing quality in teaching and learning exists in the higher education and school sectors and the appetite for using it is growing exponentially with support from social media. The promise of an extension to its remit in the March 2016 education white paper

3.   Crisp, P. and Gannon, A. (2012) *Raising standards of teaching and learning through effective professional development*. Coventry: CUREE and London: 157 Group. [online] Available at: http://www.157group.co.uk/sites/default/files/documents/skeinfeoverviewpublic.pdf

notwithstanding, there is as yet no Education Endowment Foundation[4] for further education.

The sector has proved itself adept in its use of quantitative data for driving performance review. A change of leadership focus might enable it to extend this important set of skills and systems into developing and applying much deeper understanding to build consistency and coherence around high quality teaching, learning, curricula and assessment. Such a self-improving system would have leaders knowledgeable about these four pillars of quality in their organisation and engaging with and modelling professional learning as a driver for quality improvement at every level.[5] Those staff would have the resources and the skills to collect and analyse evidence of different kinds about the interactions between their own practices and their learners' success and the opportunity to use that evidence formatively (rather than judgementally in high stakes evaluations). They and their leaders would have easy access to good quality, relevant research on effective teaching and learning strategies presented via useful tools and resources (some of which would be sourced via a post-16 Education Endowment Foundation). Above all, professional development and learning would mobilise deep content expertise, contextualised with specific teaching and learning approaches and insights for the needs of employers, learners and the development of a vibrant and ever improving workforce.

Assertiveness not victimhood – learning from others

It is a common characteristic of educators in every sector to think of their situation as unique. It is also clear that the financial pressures on the further education and skills sector leave those in other sectors paling into insignificance. It is similarly true that the stakeholders are more complex and diverse than those for other sectors. But if the sector wants to gain control of its destiny through self-sustaining improvement, it would be foolish to ignore how others are addressing this.   A key element of effective system leadership is the capacity rapidly to spot the similarities between core business developments (ie teaching and learning) in a wide variety of contexts. The Activate Learning Group in Oxfordshire, for instance, used its network with employers, schools and public authorities to promote a shared vision based on a consistent and coherent model of teaching and learning.[6] Schools in England have been collaborating in 'teaching school alliances' to co-ordinate an offer of school-to-school support, leadership and practitioner development (including formal middle and senior leadership qualifications) and teacher training. The next stage of development, happening now, is the creation of regionally (and sub-regionally) collaborating networks of teaching schools. This in turn was an application to education of the teaching hospital concept

4.   See the Education Endowment Foundation website at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/

5.   The importance of which was highlighted by Viviane Robinson and colleagues in her systematic review summarised here: Robinson, V., Hohepa, M. and Lloyd, C. (2009) *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why. Summary of the Best Evidence Synthesis* (BES). CUREE Research Summary. [online] Available at: http://www.curee-paccts.com/files/publication/1260453707/Robinson%20Summary%20Extended%20Version.pdf

6.   Cordingley, P., Crisp, P., Bell, M. and Crisp, B. (2015) *Leading Local Education and Training Report*. RSA, CUREE, The Education and Training Foundation. [online] Available at: http://www.curee-paccts.com/files/publication/[site-timestamp]/Local-leadership-of-education-%20final-report-release.pdf

Possibility Thinking

in health provision, which was designed to integrate the generation of research knowledge about health care interventions with the application of that knowledge to higher vocational skills and practice, an approach which would transfer quite sympathetically to the FE context

The oft-acclaimed responsiveness of FE and skills sector providers is a double-edged sword with too many in the system sounding and sometimes behaving like victims. Behind the attempted projection of a polished vision of the sector is a brittleness and lack of confidence further reinforced by the difficulty providers have in working in genuine collaboration. Schools, let us be clear, are frequently also in competition but they seem to be able to find some places to work together. Commercial organisations also shift between competition and collaboration – with trade associations often acting as the brokers. HEIs, by contrast, have contrived to act in concert both at a policy level and in a variety of very practical ways of which the shared digital services provided via Jisc [7] are obvious examples. Many teaching school alliances have as 'strategic partners' other schools, private and third sector providers and HEIs. For the FE and skills sector to be and to be acknowledged as a self-improving system, it needs to create the mechanisms for local, regional and national collaboration around an improvement agenda.

What if the sector took the initiative to acknowledge that improvement is necessary and continuous? It would embed in its culture and structures an expectation that its leaders are leaders of learning who model and facilitate an engagement with evidence, including from formal research – and the application of that evidence via collaborative regional and national structures. Sector leadership would benefit from learning the lessons from some of the more rigorous research on the impact of leadership[8] which showed that "promoting and participating in teacher learning and development" had twice the impact (effect size) as the next most effective activity – "planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum".

FE's fortunes have waxed and waned over the decades and the sector's perceived lack of political salience (compared with, say, schools or universities) can encourage a feeling of being the poor cousins. But fortunes change, and the sector will, in due course, be recognised again as the most efficient means of generating the quantity of skilled people the country needs – but is currently apparently unwilling to pay for. Self-help and self-regulation were proffered by one government but then snatched away by a different one now nearly a decade ago. But what was then an innovation is now the zeitgeist. The sector and its leaders need to dig in for the long haul and begin investing now in developing for themselves the culture, the systems and the institutions that will underpin a sustainable self-improving system.

7.   See the Jisc website at: https://www.jisc.ac.uk/
8.   Notably the systematic review by Viviane Robinson et al (2009) op cit.