

Strengthening the Connection between Colleges and their Local Partners

What we aim to achieve

Colleges contribute to their local areas in a great many ways. In our discussions with College Principals they often argue that this contribution needs to be recognised more widely and that they would see real benefits in having a greater level of accountability to the local community. Further, many Local Authorities (as articulated by LGA) are keen to tie colleges more tightly into the community strategy for an area. These desires have been articulated in different ways by both of these stakeholder groups. Challenges in making a reality of effective engagement of FE colleges have been recognised for some time and the Centre for Excellence in Leadership ran a seminar on this in 2007 (see Annex for extracts of the notes of this).

The Audit Commission found in 2008 that Colleges were represented on 62% of Children's Trusts (and LSC on 84%). A CLG survey of LSPs in 2006 found that colleges/universities (unhelpfully not separated) were in the Core Membership of the LSP in 53% of cases and in the Total Membership in 83% (figure for the LSC was pretty much the same). These figures approach 100% when looking at NRF areas. Research commissioned by LSIS and shortly to be published shows the considerable benefits of effective partnership working between colleges and their LSPs but we know that the picture is very varied.

DIUS has included a clause in the Apprentices, Skills, Children and Learners Bill (Clause 242) which will create a requirement on further education corporations to have regard to the objective of promoting the economic and social well-being of the people who live or work in the locality of their institution, in the exercise of their functions.

By imposing a statutory duty on FE institutions to have regard to the well-being of those people who live in its locality, colleges will be more accountable to their local areas and communities, and will be able to play a greater role as leaders, providers and partners in their development. Government wants to see local authorities doing more to recognise and take advantage of the contribution that colleges can make. This clause will strengthen their case in looking for colleges to demonstrate their contribution to the local area.

We are keen to build on this new duty to engage colleges effectively in local planning and delivery arrangements. A key example of this is in the delivery of ESOL where we are looking to establish arrangements that will ensure it is even more tied to local community cohesion priorities by being effectively targeted at the groups in greatest need within local areas.

Summary of the Clause

This clause will insert new section 19A into the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and only applies to further education corporations in England.

The clause places a requirement on these corporations to have regard to the objective of promoting the economic and social well-being of the people who live or work in the locality of their institution, in exercising their functions under sections 18 and 19 of that Act. This objective can be considered alongside others. The local area is defined as the locality of the institution – the further education college itself and the well-being of the area is to include the well-being of the people who live or work within the area.

The approach we are taking

We are in discussions with CLG, LGA, DH, HO as well as colleagues around the FE college network and others to get views on the nature of the situation and get some more evidence about what factors lead to a strong connection and how barriers could be overcome. There is some positive evidence that colleges are generally represented on their LSP and that many feel they are responding directly to local needs in their delivery.

Arguably much of this comes down to individual personalities – Principals, Chief Executives, Councillors, etc.. – and the relationships that can be forged, over time, as a result of shared history and evidence of real commitment. Clearly turn-over amongst significant posts can challenge the development of such relationships which are often built on trust. However, we should not use this as an excuse for inaction - there must be measures that would facilitate better connection.

Part of the issue may be around the lack of awareness of key partners of the nature of FE colleges and the contribution they do make so the work on identifying impact is highly relevant here, as well as tools that could be used to provide a snap-shot of the profile of FE learners that could be linked to groups that are a focus for action within a locality.

Alongside this we are actively seeking to get colleges mentioned as key partners in guidance that goes out to PCTs, Police Forces, LAs, etc..

A significant part of the challenge also lies in the need to manage expectations and emphasise that colleges have to balance a range of considerations when determining what they do. However, it may be that colleges would need to do more to align with local priorities which may mean out-reach to more challenging client groups or bending their provision in other ways and taking risks. Inevitably some degree of tension will always exist between what local partners might want from colleges and what they can actually deliver.

Questions to Consider

- How would we best articulate a vision for an “effective connection” that includes clear benefits for both sides while managing expectations?
- What is the best way to express the balance that needs to be found between colleges acting completely independently of local partners and being totally driven by local priorities as expressed by LAs, etc?
- Who are the key potential partner bodies that we should focus on?
- What are the conditions that lead to effective connection between colleges and local partners?
- What factors can get in the way of the creation of effective connections – recognising that these can be characteristics of the partners themselves and within the environment within which they operate?
- What are the qualities of college Principals that will facilitate the formation of effective connections – how can these be developed?
- Are there tools or support that colleges could be given that would help them to better communicate their role and value to local partners?
- What could be done by DIUS, LSIS, AoC, 157 Group, LGA, etc., to stimulate a strengthening of the connections?
- How can the establishment of the new funding arrangements best support this given the new role of LAs in directing funding for young people’s provision at the nature of the SFA?

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Annex: Extracts from Notes of Seminar on Further education, communities and local government

The Centre for Excellence in Leadership¹ organised a seminar on this subject in September 2007 with Andrew Campbell (Department of Communities and Local Government - DCLG), Peter Lauener (Department of Children, Schools and Families - DCSF), David Hughes (Learning and Skills Council - LSC), Nick Brown OBE (Oldham Sixth Form College) and Andrew Kilburn (Oldham Borough Council) speaking.

Much of the discussion was around the nature of LSPs and LAAs but this annex extracts some key points relating to the role of FE colleges and the factors affecting effective connection from that record.

Background

1. ...While there was enormous enthusiasm from FE, there was also experience of the local context being extremely complex and politically sensitive; concern that it was hard to find the most efficient or strategically effective points of intervention; and a feeling that engagement could be very time-consuming with limited benefits. There was enthusiasm for an opportunity to discuss further how effective strategic relationships might be developed.

The policy context

2. ...The capacity of local government and the FE system to work effectively together will be critical to ensure that a full contribution is made by education and training providers to delivery of public service outcomes in the locality.
3. The FE sector has historically been committed to equal opportunities, social inclusion and widening participation, and has a long tradition of providing second or next chance opportunities. Many of the key priorities for local government such as community cohesion, sustainable communities, civil and civic renewal, speak to the values of the FE sector, and there is a desire within the sector to ensure that the education and training dimension to these priorities is effectively delivered.

Statements from the Speakers

4. ...The FE sector is nervous about an increase in local authority power, and that there is no appetite or proposition for a return to the old days of LEA control. However there is a vital need for innovation, co-ordination and leadership at the local level, exercised in such a way as to avoid the danger of monolithic bureaucracy.

¹ The Centre for Excellence in Leadership and the Quality Improvement Agency came together on 1 October 2008 to form the new sector-led organisation, the Learning and Skills Improvement Service, dedicated to supporting excellence and leadership development in the further education and skills sector.

5. Three key issues have a bearing on the behaviour of FE and their engagement with their locality:
 - An inherent tension between targets and a demand-led system - Leitch sets specific numerical targets, setting priorities at the centre, but also states that employers and learners should shape the provision of skills training through demand. This implies that the market will set the priorities. Matthew anticipated that 'benign subversion' would be needed to mediate the impossibility of the task this tension creates.
 - An implementation gap – colleges had expressed general support for the direction of travel towards greater independence and autonomy but the changes in policy that Leitch foresees won't be enacted for at least three years. Moreover, key organisations in the new landscape, need time to develop capacity to change and carry out new roles. This applied for example to Sector Skills Councils that are not yet in a position to articulate skills needs at national, regional and local levels. So while leaders might wish to 'get on with it' rather than waiting to be told what to do, the system is not yet in a shape to work as envisaged.
 - FE colleges have a clear sense of corporate social responsibility and are committed to delivering public service and value, but fear that their community role which fits uncomfortably with targets and with markets will become residual rather than central to their purpose. Moreover, within a competitive market the fact that their values are not shared by all partners puts them at a disadvantage.
6. ...The Oldham partnership has succeeded because the partners have a central vision and values. Although difficult to agree it is essential to have this at the heart of activities.
7. The partnership has agreed disciplines about meetings. For example participants must have the authority to speak on behalf of their organisation, to commit to action and to actually execute projects that have been decided; they must be business-like, not talking shops
8. Partners must be willing to step out of organisational frames and to work in the common interest, rather than working in their own organisational self-interest. This requires preparedness to accept decisions and make sacrifices such as giving up things in the interests of the partnership and to stop doing things others do better. This had involved agreement on funding for activities being moved from one partner to another – *individual organisations may lose, but the town wins*. This moves the debate to the intrinsic value of services for the town.

Themes from the Discussion

9. A vivid feature of the local government context is the multiplicity of players and partnerships at the local level. Although Oldham has a single, central partnership, many other areas have several, and it is difficult, if not impossible, for a single organisation, even a large one like a college, to participate in them all or even choose between them all. This is a particularly acute issue for those colleges and providers who operate across several local authorities.

10. Consequently a wide range of experiences were described by participants. Some participants were expected to sit on several partnerships where their operations crossed local authority boundaries; several found it difficult to decide where to place their strategic effort given the range of groups that exist in some areas; in areas where councillors are closely involved party political game-playing threatened to create stalemate; whereas in some areas the LSP had a strong vision, in others there was an absence of a sense of a long-term strategic objective for the partnership; one college talked of fighting to be involved because they see it as a way of pursuing their own values and mission.
11. ... Funding mechanisms to deliver priorities are essential and should be as fair as possible. Whereas colleges emphasised that their mission and values included a strong commitment to creating public value rather than private value, the point was made that within the FE sector, there are private providers that do not share these values. They trade within the system on a commercial basis and commitment to contribute above contracted outcomes towards a higher-level vision for a locality may not be compatible with their business model. This also means that in a competitive contracting environment colleges and other not-for profit providers can be at a competitive disadvantage if the full range of public value outcomes being delivered are not part of the contracting process.
12. The particular contribution of FE colleges to local strategic partnerships and to community development was discussed. One formulation was that while local authorities are about place-shaping, colleges are in the business of people-shaping. Colleges are long-term players and they know how to engage with the disadvantaged; they can promote progression in learning; they have an important understanding of the community, its needs and profile and they know how to get into their communities – in short they are essential to the LSP.
13. It was argued that normally colleges have very high levels of legitimacy locally (although this is not always translated to a national level) which enables them to bring many interests to the table in local partnerships. For example, they also provide a vital link with business and can act as an intermediary with the partnership and the local authority.
14. ... There is significant synergy between the mission and values of the FE sector and the priorities and ambitions of communities and local authorities that are delivered through LAAs. Therefore, the FE sector's effective engagement in LSPs and in the creation of LAAs is a necessity. In the case of colleges it was suggested that their relationship with local government is both as a strategic partner and as a delivery partner in their locality.
15. ... The complexity of local arrangements and the difficulty of making sense of the local context, and taking strategic decisions about how to engage most effectively are striking. Given the diversity of contexts, it was difficult to immediately identify any guiding principles.

16. ...Distinctive leadership behaviours are needed. For example, to create trust in the partnership we discussed how partners need to be prepared to give up power in order to establish the legitimacy of the partnership. It was suggested that this is a particular issue for local authorities who may be comfortable or accustomed to a command and control approach or to trading on their democratic mandate. Often the democratic mandate is flimsy and they need to establish greater understanding and legitimacy with their communities and use influencing skills to establish a common vision with partners.
17. Oldham illustrated how real joint planning might lead to partners 'sacrificing' or giving up areas of provision and resources. How can leaders be sure of the support of their governing bodies or trustees in the pursuit of a higher mission, beyond that of the institution? This requires judgements about the depth of trust across the partnerships and assessment of the risk if partners are not all pursuing the same vision and values.

Constructing a proposition or articulating an ambition about the potential relationship between the FE sector and local government

18. There is no clear articulation of the potential afforded by better strategic engagement between the FE sector and local government. There is limited reference in CLG papers about the contribution of colleges, and there is little indication in strategic documents from DCSF and DIUS (or their predecessor) that they foresee significant sector engagement with local authorities outside 14-19 partnerships.
19. Nonetheless it is clear that there is significant alignment between CLG priorities and the mission and values of colleges and providers. Local strategic partnerships provide a vehicle for the FE sector to articulate a comprehensive proposition about the contribution of education and training to a range of public value outcomes including health and well-being, social cohesion, economic and social renewal.
20. The responsibility for articulating the vision and the potential benefits of such an engagement might naturally link to the work on-going in relation to self-regulation, to the role of membership associations and to individual colleges and providers. CEL will discuss with partners the contribution that we might make to such work.

Learning from practice

21. There was concern about how to learn from practice in order to assist colleges and providers to ensure that their engagement is strategic and efficient. This could include collecting inspirational accounts; analysing a possible hierarchy of engagement; identifying effective practice in relation to data sharing and analysis; exploring how to develop effective dialogue and trust with local government; and creating an environment where the inhibitors to effective practice can be examined and minimised.

Understanding and developing appropriate leadership behaviours

22. As discussed earlier, the leadership behaviours required in the communities and local government context are complex and often challenge existing paradigms. Currently leadership development for national government, for local authorities and for FE leadership is carried out independently. Chief executives of the leadership bodies do meet on a regular basis and are keen to identify areas for collaboration.
23. Leadership in the context of LSPs could provide an ideal focus for collaborative activity between the leadership bodies and government departments. This could enable thinking and practice to be developed in partnership and promote alignment. CEL will discuss with partners how this might be taken forward.

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