The FE & Skills System

A study by

The Policy Consortium

The consequences of policy decisions
Lessons for policy makers and stakeholders

Reviews by FE & Skills experts

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2017/18



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Comments and endorsements from FE & Skills sector commentators

Background

In 2017, The Policy Consortium set out to study one fundamental question:

Are the Further Education and Skills policy makers and stakeholders creating the conditions for success or failure?

We asked the sector, through a national survey, if key stakeholders were making it easier or harder to produce outstanding outcomes for all learners. We then asked respondents to identify which policy changes had helped or hindered their ability to be successful. In response, the sector has given a level of clarity not seen before in our studies. To our fundamental question, their simple answer was: 'No.' In the view of respondents, the conditions for success in the sector are not present.

This summary study looks at the policy decisions providers feel are contributing most significantly to any perceived failure in the sector, and considers why conditions that support success are not being created.

The report then sets out a vision of how the current situation can be rectified by developing a sector in which all stakeholders systematically work together to create the conditions for success, from Parliament to provider.

Each section of the report concludes with a hypothesis about the root-cause issues that have prevented the conditions for success from being created effectively in the sector, resulting in recommendations for policy makers. A summary of adverse symptoms, root-cause issues and recommendations can be found in section 12, page 45.

The report was published on April 26th, 2018. A flipbook version can be viewed using the link below, from which a pdf can also be downloaded:

http://resources.ccqi.org.uk/flipbook/PCStudy/index.html

If you would like us to keep you informed of our progress in changing the policy environment in which FE & Skills practictioners work, or if you would like to consider becoming actively involved, then please email: tony@ccqi.org.uk.

Many thanks to all of our commentators for their incisive evaluations and support.

The Policy Consortium



Professor Kevin Orr, University of Huddersfield



'The Policy Consortium has carried out a forensic examination of FE and their conclusion in this bold report that the conditions for success in the sector are not present is both alarming and well-supported in their evidence. The report identifies specific root causes for negative impact in specific areas but a persistent theme is how the volatility of government policy for the FE sector has had unintended but persistently damaging consequences. The pithy and detailed descriptions of systemic failures, such as the implementation of compulsory resitting of GCSE English and maths, may shock even those aware of the sector's situation. Each issue raised in the report has, however, a corresponding recommendation and these could be the basis for a fresh approach to policy, inspection and governance. These recommendations look beyond funding but the report is clear, "If you can't afford the solution, you haven't got a solution." At a time when the T levels are being introduced and when many colleges are merging into huge organisations, this report is uncomfortable but necessary reading for anyone who cares about FE and the millions of students the sector serves.'

Professor Ewart Keep, Director, Centre on Skills, Knowledge & Organisational Performance, Department of Education, Oxford University.



'This is an excellent piece of work, which provides a view of the problems identified in the IFG's [Institute for Government] All Change report from the other end of the telescope (i.e. it demonstrates how the policy process fails practitioners and the learners they are working with). The remorseless politicisation of education and training policy has been a major problem, and it is being compounded by the mistaken belief on the part of ministers that they are there to act as hands-on micro-managers of policy design and implementation within institutions they have little knowledge or understanding of. The results of these developments have been predictably dire. In essence, FE finds itself trapped in an endless policy loop, whereby the consequences of failed government 'reforms' and poor funding decisions create an air of crisis within the sector, that then justifies further government intervention and 'reform' to address this crisis. Unless policy makers can learn to step back, reflect, slow down, and listen to practitioners, this loop cannot be broken.'

Sue Garden, Baroness Garden of Frognal, House of Lords



'The churn in government policy makers/ministers who arrive with their own agendas has been very damaging. I felt this as a teacher, long before I was involved with politics. You will be doing teaching a great service if you can persuade incoming Ministers to listen and learn!

For work-based skills, maths and English should always be functional rather than academic. It is pointless cruelty to insist on all young people passing GCSE subjects when their skills and talents may lie elsewhere. Some of our most brilliant craft and technical people may be useless at GCSE.

Our party policy is to abolish league tables, which diminish the wonderful work of teachers in low-achieving areas. There are other ways in which parents can find out the ethos and success of schools – and of course, league tables lead schools to focus on GCSE and A level, ignoring apprenticeships and the work skills the country desperately needs.'

Dame Ruth Silver, President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership



'This report is important for a number of reasons. First, it engages the sector in a way that is constructive and highly revealing. Second, it explores the context in which further education and skills policy is made, and the negative impact constant change has on the management and delivery of provision. And third, it offers a vision for how that context can be improved to be more conducive to successful, long-term policymaking for the sector. For the Further Education Trust for Leadership, this is critical and close to our mission and work.

For far too long, policy has been in an environment that is extremely volatile and subject to kneejerk reform from ministers who often come and go without ever really coming to terms with what this important sector is about. The sector needs to be proactive and involved in driving the change FE and skills and the country more widely needs, but this will only be possible when its leaders and teachers are freed from the shackles of constant and often ill-considered change.'

Alison Birkenshaw, Principal, York College; President, AoC



'This is a well-researched report with very clear messages for all involved in the FE and Skills landscape. Two themes emerge for me: the need for policy initiatives to be evidence based and properly tested before implementation, and the difficulties caused by the underfunding of the sector when introducing any new policies. The key messages around the English and maths funding condition are clear, and there is a comprehensive set of recommendations which deserves careful consideration by all interested parties.'

Oliver Newton, Director of Policy & Research, Edge Foundation



'This study continues the excellent work of City & Guilds' Sense & Instability reports in highlighting the challenges that a state of perpetual revolution brings to the skills landscape. With growing skills shortages and the impact of the fourth industrial revolution, there has never been a more important time for skills policy. In the best systems, this vital area of work is not a political football but an area for long-term decision-making between politicians, businesses and educators, with a high degree of autonomy for successful local leaders and practitioners.'

Mike Hopkins, Principal, Sussex Downs College



'This study of the FE and Skills System, conducted by The Policy Consortium, should be required reading for Ministers, politicians, officials, policy makers, practitioners and those interested in the FE system. Whatever your view of the recommendations, they are clearly doable. This is an important contribution to the development of a likely post-Brexit FE environment, where the high quality provision of UK-based skills training is paramount for economic success and social cohesion. I'd suggest that whatever your role in the system, you read it and contribute to the post-launch debate and discussion.'

Ann-Marie Bathmaker, Professor of Vocational and Higher Education, University of Birmingham



The report makes for salutary reading, but the overall message of a long-term sustainable relationship between policy and practice is vital.

What is very apparent in the report is that the policies, structures and organisations that are in place for the FE and Skills sector in England are hugely problematic for those who work in the sector. There is a clear message that robust, constructive and enabling structures are imperative, but that those working in the sector experience the opposite. They report inspection systems that are based on questionable snapshot judgements, using criteria that have been imported from school practices and often bear no relation to conditions in the FE and Skills sector; regular changes of focus for teaching and learning, requiring all subjects to focus on ever-changing priorities, that have tenuous links to the substantive subject matter and skills of particular learning pathways; policymakers, inspectors, consultants and others who have no deep or robust understanding of the sector and its work; endemic policy change for no obvious purpose, including the recent area reviews, introduction of the new technical education reforms, and removal of requirement for a teaching qualification.

Underlying all this is chronic underfunding, along with the requirement to constantly bid for additional short-term funding to have any chance of survival, that is time-consuming and serves no helpful purpose except causing distraction and uncertainty.

The mismatch between the fields of policy and practice evidenced in the report suggests a huge divide, that is enormously difficult to address, not least because the people and organisations overseeing and controlling the sector from outside change and move on so regularly that every attempt has to start afresh, often after only months. The policy busyness that brings in yet more reforms, which are only new because the same solution implemented previously has been conveniently forgotten, avoids getting down to the crucial work required, that is emphasised in the report, of establishing and maintaining long-term committed relationships that can work to improve the sector. The evidence in this report emphasises the scale and effects of what has been happening for many, many years, and points to almost wilful practices at policy level, turning the FE and Skills sector into a convenient scapegoat, that policymakers do not care to really engage with. I am reminded of Ewart Keep's words from 2006, where he described state control of the English education and training system as 'playing with the biggest train set in the world'. It's time to stop playing, and to start taking an interest in a sector that plays a crucial role in the education and training of the population, not least the overlooked 50%, who are under-served by school and university provision.

Eddie Playfair, Principal, Newham Sixth Form College (NewVIc)



'This thorough survey of the FE and skills sector from Policy Consortium has some strong messages for all the main stakeholders in post-16 education. There seems to be a broad consensus that if we want to create the conditions for success we need a clearer vision for the sector, more joined-up policy, performance measures which better reflect our aims, less policy volatility and more secure funding.

Rather than simply passing on these concerns, the study usefully identifies 23 specific root-cause issues organised around key themes and goes on to make several positive recommendations for our key national stakeholders; all of which deserve serious consideration. The study should also prompt those of us working in the sector to ask ourselves what we could do differently to help create the kind of system which can genuinely achieve our aim of a successful learning society which serves all its citizens.'

Tim Jackson, Principal, Sparsholt College



'The FE & Skills System study conducted by Policy Consortium is an excellent analysis of the maelstrom of past initiatives and policy in which the Further Education College sector operates. If I had one ask it would be to obtain a greater level of consensus of the Professional Education and Skills Establishment before launching new initiatives so that those who will inevitably be involved in the delivery of the policy/initiative ambition, have had an opportunity to assist policymakers in ensuring that any new initiative will achieve what is hoped and results in greater coherence and overall success than has been evident over the past few years.'

Paul Nowak, Deputy General Secretary, TUC



'As this new report highlights, the FE and skills system in England has to endure an endless cycle of reform and this volatility is not in the interests of learners or providers. We need to learn from the successful skill systems in other countries where systemic stability, long-term funding commitments, and a collaborative approach by employers and unions to addressing the skills needs of young people and adult learners makes a real positive impact.'

Michael Osbaldeston, Special Adviser and Skills Ambassador, City & Guilds Group



'FE is a crucial part of the skills world and has a fine tradition of delivering both technical and life skills to the widest age range of any part of the educational system. Our Sense and Instability report showed the constant flux in the skills world, the lack of consistency, initiative overload (just one more!) – all of which is borne out by this report too. The evidence is compelling.

If we want a skilled workforce, and if we want young people prepared for the world of work, we have to provide a stable long-term approach. Further education, skills and training have to be taken out of the political arena: there is enough common ground to build a system fit for purpose, and with Brexit on the horizon this has to happen sooner rather than later. Those countries that are upheld as best in class - Germany, Austria, Switzerland - may not have perfect systems, but have had long-term stability with all interested parties – political, educational, employers, unions – working in harmony. We don't have to create new institutions [providers]: we just have to provide the ones we have with enough stability to get on with the job!'

Dr Geoff Stanton, visiting fellow at the UCL Institute of Education and former Director of the Further Education Unit



'This is an important report. It contains accounts from the front line of more than one badly judged government initiative being forced on colleges without sufficient notice – to the detriment of the learners. To add insult to this injury, colleges are then penalised by Ofsted and the funding agency for not making the initiative work in time, to the wider detriment of the service colleges provide. It requires 'action this day'!'

Cath Gladding, Research Manager, AELP



This report is to be warmly welcomed for stepping back from the day to day and for daring to ask difficult questions.

1. Does the report represent who it is speaking for or what it is speaking about? Overall, yes, because the report stays at a fairly high level of analysis (ie the wider FE system). 564 FE providers is a really good number, though only 7% were from independent training providers who have 20% of all FE learners and, for example, deliver 75% of apprenticeships, the government's flagship skills policy and the subject of massive reforms that the report focuses on.

2. It asks a great head-on questions. Example: 'are key stakeholders making it easier or harder to produce outstanding outcomes for all learners?' The data says 'no', due to 'unintended consequences of policy volatility'. I'd agree and point to:

   a. A disconnect between the current initially optimistic Minister and civil servants whose capacity and capabilities are in question more than ever: we need injections of expertise of the FE sector staff into policy-making and for policy-makers to listen and be able to understand what's being said. It's FE sector staff who are the experts.

   b. Far too many poor policy decisions and management: e.g. messed up procurement processes, half-ready reforms launched due to underestimations of complex systems developments, overestimation of employers' effectiveness as in EPA and EQA of Apprenticeships.

Policy makers can and really should do things better. So I'd particularly strongly back recommendations from this report to:

- 'Create a non-political body responsible for FE & Skills provision, staffed by education experts and advised by education researchers'
- 'Establish the contribution each stakeholder will make to the conditions for success' and set their remit and plan accordingly. This is the 'what are the core purposes of FE and how FE experts best serve these purposes' dog wagging the policy fit-for-purpose tail... not the policy tail wagging the FE dog!
- The rise in the role of employers in FE and Skills policy does not mean less of a role for providers.

3. The recommendations could have gone further, I felt, in saying 'so, what's the role of FE practitioners and leaders in all this... and how/what mechanisms do they need to be able to access in order to be influential?'

- Research like this can empower sector staff to share and develop their voice, helping the sector develop 'authoritative autonomy' as a sector – we need to set up more opportunities like this: discussions about what really matters, why we're here and what we can do to improve things?
- Financial cuts and political influence led to withdrawal of local LSCs and then regional ESFA representatives who 5-15 years ago you could pick up the phone to and have a 'sensible' conversation – now, LEPs are patchy and others in the regional tier of policy-making bodies like the ESFA seem to engage with the rest of the sector through carefully worded and caveated email responses after 2 days wait... Or it's them asking providers for data/intelligence.
- AELP and other trade bodies are rare routes into the heart of DfE for their members.

Future issues for exploration include:

- 'risk' and 'trust'
- the facilitation of the role of FE provider experts in policy development.



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