Research Report

Collaboration and Competition: A Leadership Challenge

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“The essence of the enactment of leadership for collaborative advantage would appear to involve the ability to lead contingently in the ‘spirit of collaboration’ whilst simultaneously drawing on ‘collaborative thuggery’.”

(Huxham and Vangen 2005)
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Executive Summary

This research report explores the issues and challenges faced by leaders and managers operating within a competitive and collaborative environment. It focuses on Gateshead 14 – 19 Partnership as a case study. The research methodology involved a programme of in-depth one-to-one interviews with leaders and managers from the partnership.

The primary themes of the research were to develop an understanding of the competitive and collaborative context in which the Partnership operates as a basis for understanding how the Partnership may gain an advantage from working collaboratively and what leaders and managers should do to ensure it is realised. The key findings from the research in terms of Competition and Collaboration, Collaborative Advantage, and Collaborative Leadership and Management are as follows:

Collaboration and Competition

Collaboration is seen as the process by which individuals and organisations work together for a common good and achieve collective outcomes that are beyond those which an individual or organisation can achieve independently. Competition, by contrast, is described as the pursuit of individual organisational goals in isolation from a consideration of the longer term good which potentially derives from collaboration.

A key finding from the research was that the environment in which the Partnership operates is believed to be both competitive and collaborative. The key driver for competition is seen as being structural in nature derived from Government policy that places an emphasis on performance targets and ‘league tables’. Although there is a recognition that structural elements exist and encourage partnership working, the key driver for collaboration is the inherent and internal belief of the Partnership’s key individuals that working together encourages the Partnership to be more aspirational and to believe that these ambitions can be achieved. The research also found that although it is this inherent belief that sustains Partnership working, structurally driven collaboration is seen as a required catalyst in the early stages of partnership development.

Collaborative Advantage

The research identified that collaboration can lead to a greater impact in terms of the learner experience and learner choice, because it provides partner organisations with the encouragement and opportunity to learn from each other and hence foster innovation.

A major challenge to securing collaborative advantage is ensuring that partnerships build and sustain commitment to, and ownership of, a common purpose and the means by which it can be achieved. Dealing with power and position is also critical. The research found that the concept of a Partnership Premium helps individuals to come to terms with power and position within the system and hence to make a commitment to a common goal.
The fundamentals of the Partnership Premium concept stresses the need to ensure that the benefits of collaboration are demonstrably greater than the cost of achieving the collective ambition. It further stresses that not every organisation should or will make an equal contribution or receive an equal return, but that there should be equity between the premiums received through collaborative working.

**Collaborative Leadership and Management**

A key finding of the research was that to create Collaborative Advantage in a complex competitive and collaborative environment, a leader needs to create the right ‘spirit of collaboration’. This means that the leader has to create an environment where positive relationships can flourish based on understanding and mutual trust. Furthermore, leaders and managers must constantly create and encourage opportunities to revisit the fundamental principles and reasons for working collaboratively and to celebrate the successes that have been achieved.

Finally, a leader with a clear personal vision for the partnership – a trail blazer or champion - is still seen as being relevant as this can lead to earlier and more successful collaborative working. However, striking a balance between leading by consensus and leading by direction, in order to achieve a ‘spirit of collaboration’ is seen as a dilemma that leaders need to respond to on an ongoing basis, and that the specific situational context should guide the leader’s approach.

**Introduction**

This research report is concerned to understand how leaders and managers, operating in the learning and skills sector (LSS), can respond to the dual requirements to work collaboratively and competitively. The project is set within the context of the Government’s 14–19 skills agenda and the radical reforms in the White Paper, Further Education: raising skills, improving life chances. At the heart of the reforms is the drive for improvement - that is, the pursuit of excellence. The Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) document Pursuing Excellence sets out an improvement strategy with a vision of an excellent LSS that is effectively led, fully responsive to the needs of learners, employers and communities and committed to self-improvement through rigorous and challenging self assessment. The document states that in the pursuit of excellence, no organisation can succeed alone and colleges and providers should develop effective partnerships to create networks, peer support and share good practice.

In parallel, the Leitch Review sets out a similarly ambitious vision in which the UK is seen as a world leader in skills, recognising that skills are the most important lever within the Government’s control to create wealth and to reduce social deprivation. To achieve this ambitious vision for the UK, the report proposes system change that focuses on a demand-led approach rather than one that is centrally planned. The Review proposed a number of recommendations to make the system fully demand-led, including the routing of the great majority of public funding for adult vocational skills in England through Train to Gain and Learner Accounts by 2010 and an emphasis on ensuring effective learning provider competition. The market place for learning and skills is therefore driven by an apparent dichotomy between collaboration and competition. This creates significant leadership and management challenges that will need to be addressed and solutions found.

The purpose of this research was, therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of these issues and challenges faced by leaders and managers operating within a competitive and collaborative environment. This was achieved by focusing on Gateshead 14–19 Partnership as a case study of current practices. The 14-19 Partnership in Gateshead is known as the EIP (Education Improvement Partnership).

It is a stakeholder organisation co-ordinating the contribution of members and services for the benefit of all young people aged 14 - 19 in Gateshead. Aligned to the Gateshead Children and Young People’s Partnership, its role relates to participation, progression and achievement. The Partnership comprises all Secondary Head Teachers (nine in total), the Principal of Gateshead College, a representative from the Collective (a consortium of work-based learning providers in Gateshead), Connexions, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the Education Welfare Service, and others. It is responsible for the Gateshead 14-19 Strategy, produces plans, responds to consultations and pursues funding on behalf of the wider partnership.
In collaboration with research partners Tyne & Wear LSC and HelmePARK Ltd, Gateshead 14 – 19 Partnership was successful in securing funding from the Centre for Excellence and Leadership, as part of the Centre’s programme of Practitioner Research for 2007/08. This Partnership was responsible for developing the primary research question as follows:

“How can leaders and managers operating in the LSS respond to the dual requirements to work collaboratively and competitively?”

As part of the initial planning and scoping phase of the project, a number of secondary research questions were developed as follows:

- What is the purpose of the 14-19 Partnership and what is your role and responsibility within it?
- What is your understanding of the following terms:
  - Collaboration?
  - Competition?
  - Leadership?
  - Management?
- To what extent does competition and collaboration feature within the system in which you operate?
- What do you believe are the drivers for competition and collaboration within the system?
- What are the benefits from competition and collaboration within the system?
- What are the challenges that you face in dealing with competition and collaboration?
- In what ways do competition and collaboration impact on leadership and management?
- How does competition and collaboration help and/or hinder the partnership in achieving its purpose?
- How might the balance of competition and collaboration within the system be reshaped to support the partnership in achieving its purpose?
- How might leadership and management approaches be aligned to deal with the collaborative/competitive environment in which you operate?
- In your experience are competition and collaboration mainly in tension or are they better understood as mutually-supportive?

Research Framework

This section reviews the relevant literature by exploring (a) the relative merits of competition and collaboration, (b) how organisations might gain greater impact from collaboration and (c) the leadership and management implications for this approach.

Competition and Collaboration

Competition is a deeply ingrained, profoundly enduring part of our lives. In terms of developing an understanding of what we mean by competition, Kohn distinguishes between structural competition and intentional competition. The former refers to a situation, the latter to an attitude. Whereas structural competition refers to a win/lose framework which is external; intentional competition is internal as it concerns the desire on the part of an individual organisation to be the best. Structural competition can be defined in terms of mutually exclusive goal attainment where one person’s success requires another’s failure. In this scenario, two or more individuals are trying to achieve a goal that cannot be achieved by all of them. Intentional competition is defined in terms of an individual’s competitiveness, his or her propensity to want to beat others and be first, and can take place in the absence of structural competition. The reverse situation – structural competition without intentional competition is also possible.

Kohn continues his review of competition by considering three ways of achieving one’s goals: competitively, which means working against others; cooperatively, which means working with others; and independently, which means working without regard to others’ Co-operation refers to an arrangement that is not merely non-competitive but requires individuals and groups to work together in order to achieve a common goal. The essence of structural co-operation is that individuals and groups need to co-ordinate their efforts because one of them can only succeed if the other one does as well. Reward is therefore based on collective performance which generates an incentive to want others to succeed. Kohn highlights what he believes to be the four central myths of competition – that it is inevitable, more productive, more enjoyable and likely to build character. He concludes by questioning the essence of the concept, namely mutually exclusive goal attainment. Kohn’s belief is that competition has a negative impact on human relationships whereby a structural incentive to see other people lose cannot help but drive a wedge between individuals and invite hostility.

These thoughts are echoed by other researchers including John Harvey and his colleagues who distinguish between ‘deliberate’ and ‘involuntary’ competition, which are comparable to Kohn’s ideas on “intentional” and “structural” competition. Harvey et al postulate that: “In the whole moral environment provided by our civilisation, involuntary competition becomes deliberate”. Among the personality traits that involuntary competition elicits is selfishness. William Sadler similarly insists that the structure determines how individuals view the world,
The value orientation which holds competition high is perpetuated as individuals participate in institutions which help to shape their perceptions of reality. There is, in other words, a convergence of social forces which fosters a common perception of the world so that it is viewed in competitive terms.

In this sense Kohn suggests that our psychological state and our relationships with others are not only correlated with the extent of our intentional competitiveness but are shaped by a framework of structural competition. When values follow from structure, moreover, they are more likely to be generalised throughout an individual’s life. The next two sections of the literature focus on some of the emerging thinking related to collaborative advantage and collaborative leadership.

Collaborative Advantage

Huxham and Vangen believe that the world of collaboration is one in which it is possible to feel inspired and individuals can achieve whatever visions they may have. This they term Collaborative Advantage. They also recognise that the world is filled with frustrations. There is a lot of evidence that many collaborations make slow progress and that others die without achieving anything. This phenomenon they refer to as Collaborative Inertia. Their key message is that managing to collaborate involves actively managing (in order) to collaborate. A corollary is that managing collaboration is an inexact art involving a lot of judgement, but that understanding the nature of collaborative situations provides important underpinning for those judgements.

In generic terms, the broad purposes of collaboration may be concerned at the strategic level with advancement of a shared vision, or, at the other end of the spectrum, with the delivery of a short term project. They may require considerable joint investment in action or merely the development of a relationship and some exchange of information. For some collaborations, issues of participation – either community participation in a public partnership or worker participation through industrial democracy and empowerment - are central considerations. In many other collaborations these issues do not feature at all.

The detailed purpose of an organisation’s involvement in a collaborative relationship will be unique to that situation, but will form the basis for collaborative advantage. Huxham and Vangen’s work postulates that there are a number of common bases for collaborative advantage: access to resources, shared risk, efficiency, co-ordination and seamlessness, learning, and a moral imperative. Some would argue that the most important reason for being concerned with collaboration is a moral one. This rests on the belief that the really important issues facing society – poverty, crime, drug abuse, conflict, health promotion, economic development and so on – cannot be tackled by one organisation alone. These issues have ramifications for so many aspects of society that they are inherently multi-organisational. In a seminal article, Trist argued that they exist in what he called the ‘inter-organisational domain’. Collaboration is thus essential if there is to be any hope of alleviating such issues.

Given the emerging prominence of collaboration it is perhaps not surprising that it has been extensively researched. Contributions have come from a large number of disciplinary perspectives including sociology, business policy, economics, economic geography, public policy, politics and management. They derive from a large number of theoretical bases including institutional theory, social network analysis, evolutionary theory, resource-dependency theory, transaction cost economics and critical management studies. Surprisingly though, only a very small amount of this research explicitly addresses the practice of collaborating. However, three approaches that have been used quite frequently do appear directly relevant in this context.

The first of these focuses on describing the collaboration process and conceptualises it in terms of phases or stages in a life cycle. There are a large number of versions of the phases with Moss Kanter’s version, for example, invoking an often-used metaphor of alliance as marriage. Taking the phases approach, Das and Teng identify activities that do, or should take place in each phase.

A second common approach is based on the identification of attributes, conditions or factors that, if present, will determine the chances that the collaboration will perform well or badly. Some researchers aim to provide relatively comprehensive, multidimensional pictures of the factors. Among the attributes, conditions or factors which have been identified as contributions to good performance are: inclusion of stakeholders; partner selection; mutual trust; honesty and reliability; shared vision; mutual interdependence; open communication; appropriate distribution of power; political influence; appropriate governance structure; CEO support and skilled convenors (Gray, 1989; Matthesich et al., 2001; Sherer, 2003). Poor performance factors include: personal agendas and individual egos; politicking; poor managerial relationships; geographical distances; and cultural differences (Hoon-Halbauer, 1994; Sink, 1996). There are a lot of similarities in the factors identified by different researchers across many and varied collaborative settings. Some researchers have specifically focused on the skills, competencies and structures needed to manage these sorts of factors (Buckley et al., 2002; Scott and Thurston, 1997; Williams, 2002). Other researchers have devoted their attention to in-depth investigations of the role of one particular factor in achieving successful collaboration, such as trust (e.g. Lane and Bachmann, 1998).

The third approach is concerned with the development of tools to support collaborative workshops and similar events. These generally stem from researchers with bases in strategy processes or management science. They are often concerned with the development and use of modelling methods to support the exploration of issues such as stakeholder management and alternative problem definitions that are particularly relevant to collaborative situations (Crosby and Bryson, 2004; Taket and White, 2000).
The work of Huxham and Vangen consistently highlights what causes pain and reward in collaboration. Not surprisingly, there is a substantial overlap between the issues and factors identified by them, and those identified by other researchers. These issue areas, referred to as themes in collaboration practice by Huxham and Vangen, are the basis on which their theory of collaborative advantage is constructed, as the following table elaborates.

**Figure 1: Themes in Collaboration Practice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Common aims</th>
<th>Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Membership structures</td>
<td>Working processes</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and language</td>
<td>Compromise</td>
<td>Commitment and determination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Social capital</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy and equity</td>
<td>Risk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From their extensive research, Huxham and Vangen conclude that collaboration is complex and multifaceted and that there are no easy routes to success. Often, common wisdom is impossible (or at least very difficult) to satisfy in practice, or the most obvious way of resolving an issue leads to the creation of another. In addition, alternative possibilities for addressing issues lead to opposing kinds of action. These dilemmas they refer to as tensions in collaborative practice.

**Collaborative Leadership**

In essence the focus of this research exercise is to understand how leadership issues might impinge upon, and are effected by, the practice of collaborating. Since hierarchical relationships generally do not feature in collaborative settings, it did not seem appropriate to focus directly on the formal senior business or public figures that are the subject of mainstream leadership research (Bass 1990). The traits, style and charisma approaches to conceptualising leadership that have been at the heart of mainstream leadership for many years (Bryman, 1996) are also considered to be far from straightforward to apply because they all assume a formal leader who either influences or transforms members of a group or organisation – the followers – towards the achievement of specified goals. In collaborative settings enacting leadership can mean influencing whole organisations rather than just individuals (Stewart, 1999) and, as such, there is frequently ambiguity about who the partners are and inherent difficulty in specifying collaborative aims. Huxham and Vangen, therefore conclude that it is far from straightforward to translate mainstream theories of leadership to collaborative settings.

Huxham and Vangen consider the mechanisms that lead collaborative activity and outcomes in one direction rather than another – and towards collaborative advantage or collaborative inertia. Their conceptualisation of the issue is concerned with what makes things happen in a collaboration and, therefore, includes both visionary and mechanistic aspects. As a result, this thinking does not recognise as relevant the classic distinction between leaders and managers (Bryman, 1996). The notions of informal or emergent leaders (Hosking, 1988), decentering leadership (Martin, 1992) and shared leadership (Judge and Ryman, 2001) have much more relevance. Not surprisingly, those researchers who have focused on leadership in collaboration have tended to emphasise relational leadership (Murrel, 1997), processes for inspiring, nurturing, supporting and communicating (Crosby and Bryson, 2004; Fyferherm, 1994) and organisations as leaders (Ryan, 2001).

Huxham and Vangen present a holistic view of leadership in collaboration by taking the notion of leadership beyond the individual and the organisation, to include a wider view of the mechanisms that are central to shaping and implementing collaborative agendas. The picture they present maintains that structures, processes and participants are all important in ‘making things happen’. This is seen as being significant because it suggests that those who wish to lead actively must be concerned not only with their own ability to lead and influence others but also with the design of structures and processes that are effective for the purpose of the collaboration.

In addition to considering collaborative leadership in terms of structures, processes and participants, Huxham and Vangen also consider two further perspectives on leadership activities – facilitative activities undertaken in the ‘spirit of collaboration’ and manipulative activities labelled as ‘collaborative thuggery’. Although these should not be seen as a classic dichotomy, some similarities to the dichotomies raised in classic theory on organisational leadership and management styles can be drawn. At face value, the two opposite ways of enacting leadership have some similarity to the alternative approaches to leadership – democratic versus autocratic, participative versus directive, relationship orientated versus task orientated and consideration versus initiating structure – identified by Stogdill (Bass, 1981) or to the transactional versus transformational leadership dichotomy raised by Burns (1978).

Huxham and Vangen highlight and legitimise the simultaneous enactment of both a facilitative and a directive role. As both roles appear to be essential to making progress, these should not be seen as alternative ways of leading but rather as alternative ways of acting as aspects of a leadership portfolio. This then implies that those who wish to take an active lead need to be skilled at operating from both modes and at managing the interaction between them. An overemphasis on either is not likely to generate collaborative advantage. Leadership should be seen as a way of viewing the approach of nurturing. Sometimes the situation demands activities aimed at supporting participants to work together – embracing, empowering, involving and mobilising – and at other times pragmatic approaches that, at face value, seem less consistent with the spirit of collaboration where manipulating the collaborative agenda and ‘playing the politics’ are required to make progress.
Successful leadership seems to imply the ability to operate from both perspectives and to continually switch between them, often carrying out both types of leadership in the same act. Thus the essence of the enactment of leadership for collaborative advantage would appear to involve the ability to lead contingently in the ‘spirit of collaboration’ whilst simultaneously drawing on ‘collaborative thuggery’.

A slightly different perspective on collaborative leadership is defined as a process in which people with different views and perspectives come together, set aside narrow self-interests, and discuss issues openly and supportively in an attempt to find ways of helping each other solve a larger problem or achieve broader goals. This research also states that most organisations today are beginning to understand the importance of collaboration. Many are acting on the notion that ‘having all components share commonality of purpose leads to a productive and positive environment that truly serves the common good’ for the entire organisation (Linggood et al., 1998). However, what is equally important to the process of collaboration is the leadership necessary to promote and sustain it. Lambert (1998) suggests we change our view of leadership as a noun, to think, instead of leadership as a verb. As such, we would view leadership as an action that includes ‘the processes, activities, and relationships’ in which organisations and their members engage to undertake the challenge of collaboration.

A consistent theme of collaborative leadership literature is empowerment. The general consensus is that people must be empowered in order to collaborate successfully. Thus the very essence of collaborative leadership is knowing how to empower people and do it in such a way that is fruitful for the collaborative and the people involved. It has also been suggested that there are five integral components of empowerment:

- **Assessment** – in order for collaborative leadership to occur, the leaders must be aware of the entire situation in which the collaboration is taking place.
- **Vision** – one cannot move forward as a collaborative without a vision of the end result.
- **Shared planning** – the step in which the relationship between leaders and stakeholders begin to solidify. Collaborative leaders must acknowledge the expertise of local/stakeholder leadership and allow them to take part in the planning process.
- **Providing resources** – the very nature of empowerment dictates the provision of the necessary tools to those involved as part of motivating them to engage and fulfil their goals.
- **Trust** – collaborative leadership must trust the members to utilise the resources to the utmost benefit of the collaborative.

Given that there are definite, tangible conditions which promote collaborative leadership, it follows that there would be conditions that hinder it as well. There are myriad possibilities that could impede collaborative leadership, however, the research identifies the two most common:

- **Power** – most collaborative movements need to deal with political agendas in one way or another.
- **Differences among stakeholders** – it is important to understand that differences must not only be acknowledged, they must be addressed.

Although the context for the research highlighted above was most certainly not Learning and Skills, the relevance of these ideas and themes within this context has been demonstrated. The research of Briggs et al highlighted a range of factors that enable collaborative leadership and emphasised the difficulty in translating mutual trust developed ‘around the table’ into whole system trust among the multiple senior and middle managers involved in the partnership. The Collaborative Leadership publication (Collinson, 2007) includes four CEL research reports that present examples of relatively effective collaborative leadership in practice.

Finally, in trying to frame a response and possible solution to the leadership and management challenges faced by the Learning and Skills sector, recently published research has proposed specific models and tools to support the process of collaborative leadership. Although it has its origins in the development of Communities of Practice (CoP) for e-learning, the CAMEL Model was identified by Jameson et al as being particularly useful to guide leadership action. Furthermore, the work of Penhall and Hunter in terms of the application of Theory of Change as a partnership strategic planning tool, highlighted that this approach supported collaborative leadership as well as the pursuit of excellence.

In summary, this literature review has highlighted a number of key themes for the research under three broad headings – Competition and Collaboration, Collaborative Advantage, and Collaborative Leadership. Competition is seen as a deeply ingrained and profoundly enduring part of our lives. However, collaboration is viewed as becoming increasingly relevant because it rests on the belief that the most important issues facing society cannot be tackled by one organisation alone. Collaboration is therefore seen as being complex and multifaceted. Consequently, there are no easy routes to success.
Research Methods

The research involved a multi-staged process that included planning and understanding, data collection and analysis, and reporting and dissemination. The purpose of the pre-empirical stage of the research – planning and understanding – was to develop a shared vision and understanding, with the research partners, of the rationale, focus and approach to the research exercise. A literature review in the areas of Leadership, Collaboration, and Competition was undertaken in the first instance. Following this initial review, a participatory workshop was facilitated by the research team for members of the 14 – 19 Partnership. The focus of this was to share the outcomes of the literature review; develop a detailed research methodology including primary and secondary research questions; agree a consultation interview template; and identify organisations and individuals to be consulted. To complete the pre-empirical stage of the research, the research questions were then shared with representatives from the CEL and a small cohort of the Partnership. This enabled the research team to pilot-test the questions and process prior to commencement of the empirical stage of the exercise.

The purpose of the empirical stage of the research was to capture and analyse the research evidence in order to develop robust research conclusions. In order to develop a deep understanding of the issues and challenges faced by leaders and managers within the Partnership, it was agreed that a comprehensive programme of in-depth, one-to-one interviews with the key stakeholders would be the methodology by which the data was collected. The key stakeholders interviewed as part of the research included representatives from the Senior Management team at Gateshead College; the Chief Executive of 'The Collective'; Head Teachers and Senior Managers from a number of local schools; and representatives from the Third Sector. A list of specific consultees is provided in Appendix 1.

The final aspect of the research exercise involved a workshop with research participants to review and validate the research findings and to develop appropriate conclusions.

Research Findings

This section of the report presents a summary of the research findings identified through the interview process with representatives of Gateshead 14 – 19 Partnership. The findings are presented under the headings of the secondary research questions.

What is the purpose of the 14-19 Partnership and what is your role and responsibility within it?

The purpose of the 14 – 19 Partnership is seen as encouraging improved collaborative working and the translation of this principle into direct action on the ground. Collaboration is not seen as an end in itself, but rather as a precondition to ensuring that higher level outcomes for learners are achieved, including choice, quality, achievement and progression. Although there is a belief that these outcomes can be achieved by organisations working alone, there is an inherent belief that better outcomes are achieved by working together.

The respondents see the Partnership as having both a strategic and operational purpose. At a strategic level, leadership is seen as a process of making sense of the overall landscape to ensure a sustainable future for the organisations and hence opportunities for learners. At an operational level, management is felt to be about the direct translation of this understanding into joint working approaches and practices including developing practical arrangements with other providers – for example adjusting timetables and resources, developing specialisms and actively supporting young people to move between organisations for appropriate aspects of their education.

One respondent also articulated the tensions relating to leadership and management within this context, seeing their role in the partnership as facilitating collaborative working by whatever means practicable, mixing and matching their style as appropriate between what they described as collaboration through stealth and overt action, as appropriate. Virtually all the respondents recognised their role within the Partnership as a natural component of their overall roles, enabling them to contribute to strategic direction and encourage improved co-ordination and joint working.

What is your understanding of Collaboration, Competition, Leadership and Management?

Collaboration

Collaboration was described in a number of different ways, but fundamentally, it was seen as a process of working together for the common good, and through this, gaining joint and individual organisational benefits. These benefits were described as being above and beyond what an individual organisation could achieve by working independently.
Competition

The respondents described competition in a number of ways, all of which presented a picture of competition as being potentially unhelpful if allowed to operate unfettered. One definition focused on describing competition in terms of pursuing the interests of an individual organization in isolation from considering the longer-term good which potentially comes from collaboration. Other definitions focused on describing the competitive tendencies of organizations to ensure that they attract a level of service users, and as such to compete for scarce resources to satisfy client requirements.

Leadership

Leadership was defined as the ability to influence what might happen in the future and to take people with you in delivering the necessary changes. A development of this thinking sees leadership as the function of providing an individual or a group with the authority to design and implement a system, project or approach on behalf of a wider group. This hinges on having, or developing over time, a shared vision and objectives and these being supported by the correct governance arrangements.

Management

There was a clear descriptor of management in terms of translating an agreed vision into practical systems of work on the ground, in a way that delivers the desired outcome and quality. Management was seen to relate to but be slightly different from leadership, with leaders needing to be macro managers rather than micro managers. Another perspective on the relationship between management and leadership was highlighted by reference to leaders as pathfinders and managers as path clearers. Leadership was considered to be critical in creating an environment within which successful management and collaboration could be achieved.

To what extent does competition and collaboration feature within the system in which you operate?

All respondents recognised the environment in which they operate as being both competitive and collaborative, and in the main, that both elements are believed to be required to encourage and support effective service delivery. However, there appears to be an inherent belief that more can be achieved in collaboration than can be achieved by organisations alone. Furthermore, there is a general consensus that Government systems and structures encourage both competitive and collaborative posturing, but access to limited resource, a target driven culture that views success in terms of recruitment, retention and achievement, and an emphasis on ‘league tables’, encourages organisations to compete rather than collaborate.

Leading and managing in this environment requires individuals constantly to balance opposing ideologies, with the biggest challenge to maintaining a collaborative instinct coming from individual organisations needing to demonstrate that they are better off as a result of being a member of the partnership. Consequently, the issues around competition tend to be more pressing on a day-to-day basis, and that dealing with these issues is made easier if the collaborative framework provides freedom for individuals and organisations to act autonomously when required.

Two of the respondents specifically expressed an opinion that there is too much competition within the system and that because partners all have different levels of power it is deemed to be difficult to compete by those in less influential positions, with decisions being made based on who is the “biggest bully in the playground”. For competition to be a useful tool within the system then the establishment of a genuinely level playing field was felt to be required.

What do you believe are the drivers for competition and collaboration within the system?

As highlighted in the previous section, the major driver for competition was felt to be the environment created by the Government in terms of the systems and structures that it has put in place. However, there is an inherent belief that competition does add value by keeping organisations “on their toes”, but balanced with a belief that more can be achieved in collaboration.

The key drivers for collaboration were identified as ranging from what might be termed collaboration through choice – coming together voluntarily through a belief that this was the right approach – to what might be termed externally driven collaboration – for example where a given package of funding could only be accessed through working in a collaborative way. Here, the LSC (Learning and Skills Council) and ESF (European Social Fund) funding was described as a driver for collaboration as the funding is only available to local partnerships and not individual organisations.

Although collaboration through choice was seen as the preferred route, externally driven collaboration was seen as critical in circumstances when the position of partner organizations are competitive and not collaborative. This externally driven collaboration is seen as having the potential to develop into willing collaboration through choice over time, subject to the accruing of benefits for all of those taking part and the building of trust and confidence. The imposition of collaborative working by the system is therefore seen as positive and fits with a local propensity to want to work together to achieve the best outcomes for local people.
One respondent indicated that they felt quite strongly that the Government could and should drive collaboration simply by not making it optional. Other respondents recognised a shift in Government emphasis towards embedding more collaborative structures within the system and highlighted Local Area Agreements (LAA) and Multi Agency Assessments (MAA) as evidence of this fact. These developments are seen as being positive with, in particular, the Multi Agency Assessments providing a focus on collective performance, and hence removing structural competition from the system and the negative outcomes that are perceived to accrue from this.

Finally, power and position play a part in driving organisational competitive and collaborative tendencies. Some organisations are driven to collaboration through a desire to control the environment in which they operate, and to protect their competitive position. Others, in a less powerful position, have to collaborate to ensure that they are at the ‘table’ when decisions on funding are being made. In this scenario, collaboration is seen as a strategy for survival, and not necessarily as genuine and voluntary collaboration.

What are the benefits from competition and collaboration within the system?

The discussions on benefits focused mainly on collaboration rather than competition, reaffirming the tendency and a natural desire to work together, with collaboration being seen as providing significant opportunities for adding value. This was felt in large part to be about having opportunities to learn from others, leading to the sparking of innovation and to increasing the prospects of making a greater impact.

In addition, it was felt that it could encourage thinking about new ways of working and hence in turn to encourage people to move beyond their existing comfort zones in a way that was positive.

Collaboration is seen as encouraging individuals and organisations to be more ambitious and aspirational. The process of developing a collective purpose and a feeling of being part of something bigger and better is seen as giving individual organisations the confidence and belief that more can be achieved. Self interest did, however, feature in the discussions around benefits. This was based on a recognition that if organisations are collectively more aspirational and ambitious, the ‘cake’ will be bigger and individual ‘slices’ and positions will be enhanced and sustained.

Additional benefits focused on the learner experience and the development of mechanisms to provide student choice. Where there has been a shift from protectionism ‘these are my students’ to a more collaborative approach ‘these are our students’ has enabled individual students to have access to resources from across a wider group of providers and supported the development of a more tailored and individually needs driven approach. This is a key Government priority that is happening as a result of collaborative elements within the system and is in spite of the competitive aspects. This seemed particularly pertinent to the schools that were engaged in the research. Where these schools are involved in collaborative projects with other providers, they commented on the resultant improvement in learner experience, and an enhanced position for their own organisation as a local gateway into a wealth of resource. By contrast the respondents could not point to any areas where they felt the school or the students had directly benefited as a result of competition. As previously indicated, competition was generally felt to be a destructive factor within this environment and a barrier to improved collaborative delivery approaches.

Collaboration is seen as providing a more settled and sustainable future, resulting in organisational confidence to make strategic investments that will enhance learner outcomes. In addition, collaboration allows organisations to direct effort and resource away from activities focused on competition towards activities that improve the product and learner experience.

What are the challenges that you face in dealing with competition and collaboration?

The principle challenge was seen as being how to respond positively to a collaborative agenda in order to bring benefits to the organisation, but without exposing it to unnecessary competitive risks. This challenge is made more difficult in an organisation where the pervading culture is one of competition and not collaboration.

It was felt that in some cases there was a feeling of scepticism or mistrust between organisations, particularly at the outset, and that this is also the case within some organisations. This sense of mistrust in a collaborative approach stems, in part, from a feeling that ‘we have been here before and it didn’t work last time’. Over time, the building of relationships was seen as the key to moving beyond this position and gaining the commitment from individuals and organisations. This hinged, at least in part, in ensuring partners can appreciate the extent to which collaborative working can provide benefits to the organisation, in addition to helping individuals to recognise that it will be hard work and it will have a direct resource implication. The resource implications are seen as being greatest in the early stages of partnership development and likely to be a net outflow on an individual organisation. This concern is further exacerbated by a sense that activities focused on collaboration are seen by some as diverting attention away from its core role, and hence working against a recognition of the need for partnership working.

At a more operational level, the challenges focused on dealing with the tension between wanting to provide clear and consistent messages to the market place and a competitive environment that sees information as power and something that needs to be protected. This is a barrier to a free flow of information between providers and hence onto the learner. This is further hindered when organisations are not fully bought into the concept of working collaboratively and consequently do not commit to operational protocols relating to clear lines of communication and accountability.

At the current time it appeared that although collaborative benefits were felt to have begun to accrue for the individual organisations, these were not felt to have been maximized, and not all partners were seen to have benefitted to either the same extent as others, or to a level commensurate to their engagement in the partnership.
In addition what might be described as weaker partners, who were seen as potentially having both the most to gain from collaborative working, were seen as potentially having the most to lose if stronger partners were to choose to act in a competitive or predatory manner. The final challenge is therefore, how to create fairness, flexibility and understanding within the system in order for collaboration to be successful.

In what ways do competition and collaboration impact on leadership and management?

Competition and collaboration impact on leadership and management by requiring individuals to build and maintain relationships which can accommodate both elements. The attitudes and behaviours of all concerned are seen as being critical in ensuring that positive relationships are embedded. Whilst formal frameworks and protocols can support this taking place, they are seen as not being a sufficient driver in themselves, if the right spirit is not in place. Competition is seen as creating an environment which reinforces existing non collaborative behaviour and hence impacts negatively on relationships between partners.

The main impact of competition is that it creates a level of tension and uncertainty which is not seen as constructive either in terms of long term leadership or day to day management. This competitive element within the system means that in order to maintain the collaborative direction of travel, the decision to work together has to be taken again and again on a daily basis.

How does competition and collaboration help and/or hinder the partnership in achieving its purpose?

There was a general feeling that there needs to be a balance between collaboration and competition, with elements of both being required for the partnership to achieve its purpose. Competition was seen as ensuring that organisations are “kept on their toes” and that a level of competition drives organisations to focus on delivering a quality learning experience. Competition, however, hinders the achievement of the partnership purpose when it reinforces an individual and organisational predisposition to work alone.

Collaboration was seen as helping the Partnership to achieve its purpose by: encouraging learning across organisations; supporting innovation; encouraging the free flow of information and resources; building confidence, ambition and aspiration; ensuring a customer focused rather than competitively focused partner organisations. There was a perception, however, that collaboration can lead to complacency and reduced outcomes for learners.

How might the balance of competition and collaboration within the system be reshaped to support the partnership in achieving its purpose?

In broad terms, respondents did not seem to think the balance needed reshaping, as they were already comfortable that both competition and collaboration could (and should) take place concurrently. However, they did feel that the partnership probably understands its collaborative strength and that signs of collaboration should be more overt. For example, elements such as making stronger use of partnership branding by individual organisations (alongside their own branding) or co-location of services would be tangible indicators and enablers of collaborative working.

Some respondents felt that every opportunity needed to be taken to encourage collaborative working and to show that it works on a practical basis. This includes exploiting projects which are capable of bringing about a partnership premium, and focusing on local examples of best practice that will support the process of building partner recognition for the need to work together and establishing commitment and ownership.

Influencing the external competitive and collaborative drivers that impact on the local environment is seen as particularly difficult, and reshaping the balance at the local level is hindered by a lack of control over these factors. In the short term, however, leaders need to be engaging with Government to help them understand the impact of the system they create and the role of competition and collaboration within it. There is a belief that Government is listening to the voice of the sector in terms of needing to create an environment for collaboration, and the example of Multi Agency Assessments was highlighted as evidence of this.

However, it was felt that over time, a shift might naturally occur towards a genuinely and inherently collaborative approach, and therefore the need for external drivers to shape the environment will be less. The critical success factors that will lead to this were identified as building trust between individuals and having the confidence that working together will lead to improved outcomes for individuals, organisations, and learners. The outcomes for individuals and organisations do not necessarily have to be equal so long they are commensurate in some way with the size, scale and contribution of the partner.

How might leadership and management approaches be aligned to deal with the collaborative/competitive environment in which you operate?

There was a general belief that the current leadership and management approaches were already sufficiently aligned to deal with the collaborative and competitive environment. It was felt that the relationships, which the respondents believe are so critical to moving forward, are developing and the partnership has already begun to demonstrate its success. Although there was still felt to be some jockeying for position within the partnership, and some bigger player domination, there appears to be a real confidence that these issues will resolve themselves as relationships mature.
Continued leadership and managerial commitment to collaboration, hard work and time are seen as enabling the partnership to reach a point where a collaborative approach becomes a self-reinforcing behaviour. In a sense, it was felt that it is leadership at the national level that needs to understand the impact of competition and collaboration, and to establish policy and procedures that are in line with the environment it wants to create. At the local level, an environment that places greater emphasis on collaboration is seen as enabling local partnerships to flourish.

As an overall position the respondents felt that there was a need to move away from a leadership and management approach which still, either tacitly or overtly, encourages and drives competition. This was seen as most likely to be achieved where a collaboration has a genuinely shared collective vision, making it more likely that it could demonstrate a successful track record of delivering collective responses to previous practical threats and opportunities. In effect an ideal collaboration is one in which an organisation, even if it has been driven to join in the first place, does not now want to leave and indeed could not do so even if it wanted to.

In your experience, are competition and collaboration mainly in tension or are they better understood as being mutually-supportive?

A range of perspectives were raised relating to whether competition and collaboration are mainly in tension or mutually-supportive. One viewpoint provided by an enthusiastic supporter of collaboration was that there is not a conflict between supporting a collaborative position and being advocates and supporters of appropriate elements of competition. In general, there was a belief that a constructive and mutually supportive balance between collaboration and competition is being achieved locally, and that, in the main, this is welcomed.

Some respondents did feel that there tended to be a tension between the two, but that the ‘trick’ was to try and make this tension creative rather than simply sapping energy and becoming a potential or actual drain on resources. Representatives from some schools however did not appear to consider that there was anything particularly positive about the nature of the competitive environment within which they saw themselves working. Indeed they reported that they felt it was working against what they saw as the requirement to ensure a sustainable future for schools in order to meet the best interests of current and potential future students at a local level.

They acknowledge that this viewpoint is not necessarily shared by everyone in the sector, being grounded in a view that the organisations that they represent were not felt to be well placed in terms of direct competition with others. As a consequence of having a weaker competitive position relative to others, they believe they have more to gain from collaborative working, but are therefore more susceptible to manipulation from organisations in stronger competitive positions.

A final viewpoint on this issue relates particularly to managing competition in the system. Based on a belief that competition is beneficial and can work in a mutually-supportive way with a collaborative approach, then leaders need to ensure that there is equality, fairness and a level playing field for all partners.

Competition, by its very nature, can lead to a non-competitive position where one organisation is all powerful potentially resulting in a reduction in service quality, as a result of this protected position. In this sense, competition ultimately turns in on itself to mitigate the benefits of driving up service quality, which until this point is seen as a significant benefit of the approach.

How can leaders and managers operating in Gateshead 14-19 Partnership respond to the dual requirements to work collaboratively and competitively?

A key to ensuring that partners can respond to the dual requirements to work collaboratively and competitively, was identified as the ability of leaders and managers to create sufficient collective space to fully articulate and understand the issues created by working in this fashion. The challenge for these leaders and managers is to establish and maintain trust through a commitment to open and transparent systems and procedures. Because there is a constant tension between collaboration and competition, individuals need to be seen to be behaving and interacting in a way that fosters a culture of collaboration.

A key concept highlighted by the partner representatives was a Partnership Premium, and the need to collectively demonstrate that it is being achieved. In order that organisations will commit to pooling some of their authority, autonomy and resources for the benefit of a shared purpose, leaders and managers need to be constantly demonstrating a clear return for the organization as a result of taking part in the collaboration. This is the aspect the partners identified as being the Partnership Premium and a visual representation is provided below:

Figure 2: Understanding Partnership Premium
Leadership was defined as the ability to influence what might happen in the future and to then take people with you in delivering the necessary changes. A development of this thinking sees leadership as the function of providing an individual or a group with the authority to design and implement a system, project or approach on behalf of a wider group. This hinges on having, or developing over time, a shared vision and objectives and these being supported by the right governance arrangements. The shaping of strategic direction then leads onto a debate as to whether this can be achieved through a top down, individual led approach or a bottom up consensus approach.

On balance, the respondents felt that having a leader with a clear personal vision for the partnership – a trail blazer or champion – could often lead to earlier and more successful collaborative working, although risks were associated with this if organisations, as a consequence, did not feel engaged. In this scenario the momentum and short term gains from an initial directive leadership approach could be lost in the medium to long-term, if either the individual moved on or a more consensual leadership style was not developed and applied. Striking a balance between leading by consensus and leading by direction is seen as being a critical dilemma that leaders need to respond to on an ongoing basis and that the specific situational context should guide their approach.

However, regardless of leadership style, it was felt to be important that leaders are seen as having credibility in their sector. This was considered to be most easily achieved if it is grounded in direct working experience. Again, one of the identified leadership challenges comes from the notion of organisations having to give up some autonomy or power in agreed areas, and putting this in a pool which someone else might manage or lead. An important indicator of a successful and mature collaboration was the extent to which a partnership board would defer decision making responsibilities to a group or individual (within agreed parameters) on behalf of the collaboration.

Conclusions

This report has examined an apparent dichotomy in the market place, between collaboration and competition, which creates significant challenges for leaders and managers in the sector. The case study of Gateshead 14 - 19 Partnership has sought to develop a deeper understanding of the issues and challenges faced by leaders and managers operating within a competitive and collaborative environment. The conclusions from the research are presented in this section under the headings: Collaboration and Competition, Collaborative Advantage, and Collaborative Leadership and Management.

Collaboration and Competition

Collaboration is seen as the process by which individuals and organisations work together for a common good and to achieve collective outcomes that are beyond what an individual or organization can achieve independently. Competition, by contrast, is described in terms of pursuing the interests of an individual organization in isolation from considering the longer term good which potentially derives from collaboration.

All respondents recognise the environment in which they operate as being both competitive and collaborative. Although both collaboration and competition are seen as being appropriate within the system, there is a genuine belief in, and a genuine desire to, work collaboratively. The key driver for competition is seen as being structural in nature. This is created by the Government’s performance management approach that focuses on a target driven culture that views success in terms of individual organizational performance related to quantitative recruitment, retention and achievement figures, overlaid with an emphasis on ‘league tables’. Competition is seen as ensuring that individual organisations ‘keep on their toes’, do not become complacent, and continue to improve quality.

The drive for collaboration is also seen, in part, as structural in nature. However, the key driver appears to derive its energy from the inherent and internal belief of the key individuals that working together encourages the partnership to be more aspirational, and to believe that these ambitions can be achieved. Structurally driven collaboration is seen as being most needed during the early stages of partnership development, with the potential in the longer term, to lead to willing collaboration through choice, subject to the accruing of benefits for all of those taking part and the building of trust and confidence.

Collaboration is seen as providing organisations with the opportunity to learn from each other and foster innovation. It encourages individuals to think about new ways of working and hence, in turn, to encourage people to move beyond their existing comfort zones in a way that is positive. The removal of protective practices from the system is seen as leading to greater impact in terms of the learner experience and learner choice, both key Government priorities for the sector. Finally, collaboration provides organisations with the perception of a more settled and sustainable future which encourages the organisation to concentrate time and effort away from activities focused on competing and towards activities that improve the product and the impact for young people.
Collaborative Advantage

Creating benefits from collaboration, above and beyond the cost of taking part in it, provides the partnership with a number of significant challenges. The concept of a Partnership Premium was highlighted as critical to continued buy-in by organisations to work together. The fundamentals of this concept stress the need to ensure that the benefits of collaboration are demonstrably greater than the cost of achieving the common goal. In a purely collaborative environment, not every organisation either can, or indeed necessarily should, make an equal contribution or receive an equal return, however there needs to be seen to be equity within the system. In this scenario, varying levels of power do not necessarily have a significantly negative impact.

Power and position are seen as playing a significant part in driving organisational competitive and collaborative tendencies. Some organisations are driven to collaboration through a desire to control the environment in which they operate and to protect their competitive position. Others, in a less powerful position, have to collaborate to ensure that they have a future.

A key challenge in ensuring that partnerships achieve collaborative advantage is that they build and sustain commitment to, and ownership of, a common purpose, particularly within an environment where some leaders and managers believe that: “we’ve been here before and it didn’t work last time”. Creating a sense of fairness and equity also helps to ensure that positive relationships develop and mutual trust is established. Finally, understanding and flexibility within the system provides individual partners with the freedom to deal with short pressures in a way that does not jeopardise the development of positive long-term relationships.

Collaborative Leadership and Management

Leadership is defined in terms of shaping the strategic direction for an organisation or partnership, and to ensure that there is a shared understanding and commitment to that vision. Leadership is also seen as the function of providing individuals and groups with the motivation and authority to design and implement a system, project or approach on behalf of a wider group.

Management is defined in terms of translating an agreed vision into practical systems of work on the ground, in a way that delivers the desired outcome and quality. Leadership was considered to be critical in creating an environment within which successful management and collaboration can be achieved.

Competition and collaboration impacts on leadership and management by requiring individuals to build appropriate relationships which can accommodate competitive elements within an overall collaborative landscape. Achieving this is seen as being reliant on the attitudes and behaviours of the leadership as well as all of the other partners taking part in the collaboration. Whilst formal frameworks and protocols can support this taking place, they are seen as not being a sufficient driver in themselves, if the right spirit of collaboration is not in place.

On balance, the respondents felt that having a leader with a clear personal vision for the partnership – a trail blazer or champion – could often lead to earlier and more successful collaborative working, although risks are associated with this if organisations, as a consequence, do not feel engaged. Striking a balance between leading by consensus, and leading by direction, is seen as being a critical dilemma that leaders need to respond to on an ongoing basis, and that the specific situational context should guide the leaders approach.

The competitive drivers within the system tend to be more pressing on a day-to-day basis, and dealing with these issues is easier if the collaborative framework provides freedom for individuals and organisations to act autonomously when required. The role of leadership, in this scenario, is to ensure that there is a collaborative environment that is underpinned by understanding and mutual trust. Where competitive pressures are greatest, the leaders and managers have to take and encourage decisions that maintain the collaborative direction of travel. Leaders and managers must, therefore, regularly create and encourage opportunities to revisit the fundamental principles and reasons for working collaboratively, and to celebrate the successes that have been achieved.

There is a general belief that the current leadership and management approaches within the partnership are sufficiently aligned to deal with the collaborative and competitive environment. It is also felt that the relationships, which the respondents believe are so critical to moving forward, are developing and the partnership is already able to evidence and celebrate its success. Continued leadership and managerial commitment to collaboration, hard work, and time, are seen as enabling the partnership to reach a point where a collaborative approach becomes a self-reinforcing behaviour that can withstand any external drivers for competition.
References


   (b) May, M. A. and Doob, L (1937) A Research Note on Co-operation and Competitive Behaviour American Journal of Sociology p 887-91


37. Chesterton (2004) Local Authority Demos

Appendix 1 – Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Participant</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Type</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Principal</td>
<td>Gateshead College</td>
<td>FE Provider</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assistant Principal (14-19)</td>
<td>Gateshead College</td>
<td>FE Provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-19 Manager</td>
<td>Gateshead College</td>
<td>FE Provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing Director</td>
<td>Access Training</td>
<td>WBL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-ordinator of the 'Collective'</td>
<td>Access Training</td>
<td>WBL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manager Young Apprenticeships</td>
<td>Access Training</td>
<td>WBL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manager Director</td>
<td>NEETA</td>
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<td>Head Teacher</td>
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<td>Hookergate School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assistant Head</td>
<td>St Thomas More School</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of Engineering</td>
<td>St Thomas More School</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Head</td>
<td>Kingsmeadow School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gateshead 14-19 Partnership</td>
<td>Gateshead Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partnership Director - Gateshead</td>
<td>Tyne &amp; Wear LSC</td>
<td>Funder</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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We recognise that there are many innovative and effective leaders and leadership practices in the Sector that warrant investigation, analysis and wider dissemination of best practice. We would like to engage with existing networks within the Sector and develop a wider practice-led research community contributing to current debates on leadership and other related issues.

If you would like to receive further information on the Research Programme, please contact:

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