The Government is pursuing personalised education. Learner voice is a fundamental aspect of personalisation and perhaps the most important ‘gateway’ for change and improvement.”

(Futurelab 2006)
Research Publication Notices

Research Reports
Many of the documents in this series are prepublication/preprint articles, which may subsequently appear (part or whole) in peer reviewed journals and books. In most cases they are draft documents, the purpose of which is to foster discussion and debate, prior to publication elsewhere, whilst ideas are still fresh. Further information about the research programme and other papers in this series can also be found at the following websites:

http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk or
http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/cel/

Citation Notice
Citation should conform to normal academic standards. Please use the reference provided or, where a paper has entered into print elsewhere, use normal journal/book citation conventions.

Copyright
The Copyright of all publications on work commissioned by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership is owned by Inspire Learning Ltd, from whom permission should be sought before any materials are reproduced. Short sections of text, not to exceed two paragraphs, may be quoted without explicit permission, provided that full acknowledgement is given.

Centre for Excellence in Leadership
The Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) was launched in October 2003 as a key national agency, but now operates through a charitable trust formed by its operating company on 1 April 2006. CEL's remit is to foster and support leadership reform, transformation, sustainability and quality improvement in the Learning and Skills Sector. CEL's Research Programme is sponsored by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) to whom all the results will be reported.

Disclaimer
These projects have been commissioned by, but do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for Excellence in Leadership.

Contact Details
Centre for Excellence in Leadership
Lancaster University Management School
CEL Research Office, Room B59
Gillow Avenue, Lancaster, LA1 4YX
Professor David Collinson
National Research Director
Tel: 01524 593147
Email: d.collinson@lancaster.ac.uk

© CEL – March 2008
Contents

Editorial Introduction  
David Collinson, National Research Director, CEL  

Leading Personalisation  
Dominik Lukeš, City College Norwich, Fintan Donohue, North Hertfordshire College and Peter Mayhew-Smith, Lewisham College  

The Development of a Regional Learner Panel: Involving “everyday learners” in leadership  
Dr Colin Forrest, Learning and Skills Council Yorkshire and the Humber Region and Lisa Keenan, People in Action, Leeds  

Team Coaching for Learner Success  
Jo Burbridge and Jayne Morgan, Lewisham College  

The Leadership Implications for FE Provision of Plans to Raise the Participation Age to 18  
Darren Moore, North Devon College  

Further Information and Contact Details  

List of Volumes in the Series
Personalising Learner Voice

Editorial Introduction, Professor David Collinson

Introduction

This is the eleventh edited collection in the series of CEL volumes designed to showcase research produced by “practitioners” in the Learning and Skills Sector (LSS) on important leadership-related themes. The four research reports in this volume explore the growing interest in leadership and the learner voice and, more specifically, consider creative initiatives around “personalising learner voice”. This volume reflects and reinforces CEL’s strategic commitment to enhanced learner engagement across the sector. It also builds on other CEL practitioner research reports published in earlier edited volumes (Collinson 2007d).

The impetus for enhanced learner engagement in the sector has come from various sources, including the Foster review, the FE White Paper, the LSC’s Framework for Excellence and Learner Involvement Strategy, the QIA’s Improvement Strategy and the DfES’ “Personalisation” agenda. These reports and policy documents suggest that enhanced and more personalised learner engagement can produce positive outcomes related to learning, quality improvement and sustainable organizational change.

The research findings presented in the following four practitioner reports highlight a number of key messages for understanding the relationships between leadership, personalisation and learner voice. These papers outline research on personalisation, regional learner panels, coaching for learners and on student views about raising the school leaving age.

In the first report, Dominik Lukeš, (City College Norwich), Fintan Donohue, (North Hertfordshire College) and Peter Mayhew-Smith, (Lewisham College) examine the relationship between leadership action and the personalised learning agenda in the FE sector. Building on cooperation between three FE institutions, their project found that personalising learning can increase the satisfaction of both learners and educators. Acknowledging that its meaning is not always clear, the authors define personalisation as an approach to education giving more power as well as responsibility to the learner. They argue that all learners must expect additional responsibilities as well as challenges to result from increased control over their learning. Suggesting that technology can also enhance personalisation, the authors conclude that college leadership plays a crucial role in facilitating personalisation.

The second report by Colin Forrest (LSC Yorkshire and the Humber) and Lisa Keenan (People in Action, Leeds) explores the evolution of the Regional Learner Panel (RLP) currently being trialled in Yorkshire and Humber. Acknowledging that the dynamics of the panel were highly complex, they discuss important tensions regarding autonomy and agenda ownership. The RLP also provided a positive setting to develop a
community of practice in which learning and leadership could develop. It enabled leadership to be distributed in ways that enhanced the synergy of group members’ contributions. The authors conclude that effective facilitation of such panels is key to the development of the group and individuals within it.

In the third report, Jayne Morgan and Jo Burbidge (Lewisham College) suggest that coaching techniques can improve learner success and retention rates. Their research found that solutions focused coaching improved learners’ confidence, particularly because the technique empowered students to find solutions for themselves (see also Sallis and Hubert 2007).

In the final report, Darren Moore (North Devon College) considers the implications for leadership in FE of raising the participation age (RPA) to 18 years old. He explores the views of practitioners and presents two cases of young people who have not stayed in education or training post-16 and asks how this might be prevented in future. Moore suggests that, while the idea of RPA is generally supported, it raises many issues that FE leaders will have to address in ensuring that the new legislation is successful.

In editing this volume, the original research reports have been condensed to enhance the overall integration and cohesion of the collection. Some of the original reports included extensive reviews, for example of the leadership literature and recent government policy documents, as well as presenting more detailed accounts of research methodologies and findings. In the interests of space, these sections have been edited down, most appendices have been removed and every report has been structured using a standard format.

The CEL Practitioner Research Programme

These four CEL reports are drawn from the 2007-08 round of research commissioning. In the summer of 2007, the Lancaster research team launched Phase Four of the CEL practitioner research programme with a nation-wide tender process. As in previous years, this tender attracted an enormous response, providing further evidence of the very strong appetite that exists across the LSS to conduct research on the sector, by the sector and for the sector. For the period October 2007 to March 2008, the evaluation panel agreed to fund 35 practitioner research projects, based on the following research themes: Distributed Leadership, Employer Engagement, Equality and Diversity, Leadership Excellence, Leading Quality Improvement, Learner Voice, and Talent Management and Leadership Development.

The CEL practitioner research programme enables practising leaders and managers in the sector to undertake research on highly relevant and topical issues. It is the result of a personal initiative by the chief executive of CEL, Lynne Sedgmore, who was keen to encourage a community of “practitioner scholars” and to provide an opportunity for practising leaders and managers in the sector to engage with research. The main aims of the programme are to:
support research that critically investigates leadership issues in the LSS,

provide the sector and stakeholders with evidence-based and theoretically-informed research findings by addressing current issues,

strengthen networks linking practice, research and policy to build awareness of the importance of practitioners engaging with the research process,

disseminate research findings as widely as possible and communicate these in ways that are useful to recipients,

encourage networking between researchers to build a sustainable research community within the LSS.

Since its inception, we have steadily increased year on year the amount of funding allocated to the Practitioner Project Scheme to cope with the large number of applications received through the annual tendering system.

The programme provides individual practitioner-researchers with the opportunity to develop their own original research question, reflect on current practice, and produce research findings that can both shape organisational change and improve future policy and practice. Each project begins with a clear plan to examine a particular research question informed by specific assumptions, methodologies and objectives. Practitioner researchers attend two workshops which provide support and guidance in undertaking the research, analysing the data, and writing-up final reports. The design of each workshop is a mixture of information-giving and network opportunities with space for dialogue and discussion. There is also an opportunity at each event to deal with any dilemmas or issues that may have emerged during the project.

Research is central to CEL's mission. Concerned to enhance the inter-relationships between research, policy and practice, CEL seeks to increase the impact of research on leadership development and on sector policies and practices. Research impact can occur in numerous ways. By broadening the knowledge base of the sector, research can inform policy construction and implementation. The findings of research may change organizational structures, cultures, resourcing or delivery. More subtly, they might lead to changes in understandings, attitudes or practices (Nutley et al 2003). Hence in many ways, research provides evidence-based knowledge that is useful and usable for those in the LSS.

There are many leadership issues in FE, and in the LSS more broadly, that warrant investigation and analysis. Yet, research in this sector is still very much in its infancy (Hillier and Jameson 2003). This research programme and the series of edited volumes emerging from it enable employees in the sector to develop a research voice, to participate in the setting of research agendas and to define the key themes for leadership. In doing so, practitioners are actively engaged as researchers in the process of knowledge production. This strengthening of a research community in the LSS constitutes an important objective of the CEL research programme.
CEL created the practitioner programme with the intention that research can positively influence the sector and inform CEL's teaching programmes. Equally, research engagement itself can constitute a learning experience, enhancing researchers’ own understandings and practices. The programme is therefore designed to foster the research-based skills and expertise of staff in the sector. This increased focus on research-based knowledge and experience is particularly relevant at the current time, as the UK government is keen for FE colleges to offer more degree-level/HE programmes.

Underpinning this CEL practitioner research programme is also the view that theory and practice are both very important and often mutually-reinforcing. Much of the debate about research impact focuses on the importance of “evidence-based” perspectives, but sophisticated empirical research should also be theoretically informed. Explicitly or implicitly, theoretical perspectives inform all empirical research (Fox, Martin and Green 2007). Suffice it to say here, that theory and practice are best viewed as inter-related and the CEL research programme seeks to encourage mutually-reinforcing relationships between theory, development, policy and practice.

Since the practitioner scheme began in October 2004, over 100 projects have been funded. In 2007, CEL published five edited volumes of evidence-based practitioner research, as follows:

- Volume 1 - Researching Leadership in the Learning and Skills Sector: By the Sector, On the Sector, For the Sector
- Volume 2 - Developing Middle Leaders
- Volume 3 - Leading Quality Improvement
- Volume 4 - Leadership and the Learner Voice
- Volume 5 - Collaborative Leadership.

To date, over 7,000 copies have been distributed across the sector with Volumes 1 & 4 already having to go to reprint. From the current phase (2007-08), we are now publishing another series of CEL practitioner research volumes.

Feedback received so far from the sector indicates that the CEL Practitioner Research Programme is beginning to have a significant impact, informing practice, influencing leadership development, helping to engage those working in the sector with research and building a sustainable research community. A key aim of the programme has been to disseminate the research findings as widely as possible and to communicate these in ways useful to recipients. Practitioners, stakeholders and policy makers are much more likely to engage with the research if it is relatively easy to digest, useful and practical. Therefore the research is disseminated in comparatively small, readable reports that are designed to facilitate the implementation of evidence based research into practice.
The CEL programme provides practitioner researchers with space to reflect on current practice, to explore how other organisations work and how they could improve their performance as individuals, teams and in organisations. It can also facilitate staff development in the LSS. For example, CEL research publications are being used on leadership and management programmes and as professional development for staff, with some colleges giving accreditation for participation in a research project as part of their CPD.

For organisations, the research has encouraged new collaborative partnerships and the sharing of good practice. CEL has found that engaging practitioners with the research process has given the sector a sense of ownership, as well as increasing awareness of the importance of research and how it can influence and improve policy and practice. In these ways, the CEL practitioner research programme is helping to facilitate more reflexive, critical and reflective learning cultures within the LSS.

References


Leading Personalisation

Dominik Lukeš, City College Norwich, Fintan Donohue, North Hertfordshire College and Peter Mayhew-Smith, Lewisham College

Executive Summary

This report presents the results of cooperation between three FE institutions on a project aimed to elucidate the parameters of leadership in the introduction of a personalised learning agenda. The project found that personalising learning can increase the satisfaction of both learners and educators. A personalised approach to the development of middle managers can be successful in the redefinition of institutional culture; the use of Personalised Leadership Plans modelled on the portfolio approach to learning has proven especially productive. However, confusion can occur over the meaning of personalisation. Conflicts can arise between the traditional conception of learner voice through student representation and learner ownership of the learning process with greater freedoms. Personalisation also places greater responsibilities and time/work demands on students; student representation usually focuses on the effective delivery of college services rather than on shaping the face of education. Technology can also play a key role in personalisation, but only if it is introduced as part of an institutional culture that is already broadly receptive to the personalisation agenda. College leadership needs to lead by example; i.e. it is impossible to lead a personalisation agenda in a traditional centralised approach to management both because of middle-management and general staff expectations.

Introduction

This research project aims to explore the potential of leadership action in the context of implementing a personalised learning agenda in the FE sector. The project has run along multiple strands, each being the responsibility of one of the partner institutions. The research seeks to contribute to knowledge about the relationship of leadership and personalisation, with special emphasis on effective leadership behaviours, and options for implementing technological support for the representation of student views and the promotion of learner self-advocacy. The project ran in parallel with a CEL-sponsored development project “Leadership for Personalisation” in which some of the partners are engaged. The activities under these two projects frequently intersected at various levels with the results of the research reported here intended to inform the development activities of the “Leadership for Personalisation” project.

The research partners were:

- City College Norwich (CCN), Coordinating Partner
- Lewisham College (LC)
- North Hertfordshire College (NHC)
The objectives set out at the beginning of the project were as follows:

**Lewisham College**

- Identify appropriate leadership behaviours and management practices required to make personalised learning successful in an FE College.
- Identify resources needed to develop practical implementation of personalised learning.
- Review potential linkages between personalised learning and improvement strategies.
- Provide description of leadership and management strategies and training and development needs required for the implementation of personalised learning.

**North Hertfordshire College**

Examine any correlation between personalisation and learning and personalisation and leadership. Identify how personalisation and learning can inform the NHC Leadership Programme.

**City College Norwich**

- Investigate models of student representation which can support self-advocacy within CCN’s model of personalised learning.
- Explore new technologies to support those representation frameworks and individual student’s needs to develop self advocacy.
- Investigate models of differentiation of delivery of training in the workplace.
- Explore new technologies to deliver personalisation in the workplace.

Each institution worked independently towards these objectives in accordance with its own personalisation agenda. Since the introduction of personalisation is an ongoing activity, many of the research activities outlined in this report will continue as part of the development project mentioned above. This report describes the joint findings of the three institutions and also some of the parallel activities that took place as part of the research.

When the project commenced, all partners agreed to define personalisation as an approach to education giving more power as well as responsibility to the learner for their own learning. A major support for this definition was derived from current government-driven initiatives. However, this definition does not offer specific models through which learners can avail themselves of ‘control over their own learning’. Personalisation is not always readily distinguishable from differentiation. For instance, one of the partners (Lewisham) sees differentiation as clearly distinct from personalisation whereas the other two view it as integral to their personalisation efforts. Additionally, it is also important to distinguish between levels of institutional implementation of personalisation – from shallow to profound – which can result in
organisations with radically different educational approaches being included under the personalisation umbrella.

For the purposes of this research report, personalisation is viewed as an institutional initiative aimed at giving learners additional control over the direction of their learning by expecting both learners and teachers to modify their expectations and practices. These new practices would include, but are not limited to, assessment negotiation, student-involvement in agenda setting, personalised learning portfolios, individual target setting, learning strategy negotiation, etc. All learners must expect additional responsibilities as well as challenges to be the result of increased control over their learning.

**Research Framework**

The research framework of the Leading Personalisation Project is based upon the knowledge emerging from the exploration of personalisation started at Lewisham College (LC). The initial assumptions were that, in order to respond to the external challenges of government drivers, there was a need to create a leadership culture that delivered in ‘real-time’ and that this in turn required a transformation in the skills and mind sets of leaders. The findings emerging from the Personalisation Programme at LC suggested that the delivery of such an agenda required a paradigm shift in the ways in which teachers interact with students.

North Hertfordshire College (NHC) speculated that transformational change would be needed in the training and development of leaders charged with delivering personalisation in the curriculum and services provided to learners. Any leadership development programme would therefore need, in particular, to develop thinking and action that would impact on the experience of the learner in ‘real time’. Much of NHC’s current practice was evaluative over a long and often retrospective timescale. Leaders tended to make changes that would benefit future learners rather than learners currently underachieving. College leaders did not have the mindset and processes in place to deliver the personalisation agenda that would require flexibility and responsiveness to learner advocacy in a more immediate (‘real time’) environment. In order to move to this position it was necessary to ‘freeze’ and then ‘unfreeze’ the organisational model. This would enable all College managers to establish the College’s current position, while simultaneously exploring where the College needed to be in the transformational environment that now characterises the FE sector.

At the same time, LC was developing more accurate up-to-date information for the college leadership. It was hoped that the introduction of personalisation would be strengthened if extra observation time could be fed into the management processes and thus help maintain and expand the management culture of personalisation. Based on initial findings that there is a real diversity in the nature, quality and understanding of personalised practices, Lewisham was asking to develop a consistent corporate definition of personalisation.
To complement the picture, City College Norwich (CCN) provided a strong tradition of supporting the learner voice through institutions of student representation, including full time Student Union leadership. At the same time, CCN was embarking on an ambitious personalisation agenda inspired by efforts at Lewisham but proceeding with a slightly different model of personalisation built around the notion of learner voice. CCN's main aim was to explore different models of learner advocacy given its particular approach to personalisation. Of particular interest was the use of technology in supporting personalisation and differentiation.

The entire project was structured as a qualitative research exercise. All project partners remained within the confines of this agenda. Furthermore, many of the research instruments used including questionnaires, observation and interview formats were also part of the toolkit supporting the development of individual institutions’ personalisation projects, placing the overall tenor of the project squarely into the arena of action research. The following sections describe specific research activities undertaken by individual project partners.

**North Hertfordshire College**

The research explored the experiences of 45 individual managers and attempted to map their understanding and experiences. The methods used to collect this rich and varied qualitative data included:

- Psychometric testing (quantitative as well as qualitative data were collected using these instruments).
- One to one interviews on 25% sample of participating managers (external consultant engaged to complete interview process).
- Small group feedback.
- Cross referencing to other research findings on personalisation of learning.

**Lewisham College**

The College has undertaken two research exercises in relation to this project. These consisted of:

- Focus groups with College managers and staff to establish approaches adopted by them in implementing the personalisation agenda, especially how they went about managing change and developing new ways of working. This was based on a set of general questions about behaviours required for the leadership of change and how new practices became embedded or not.
- Review activity of the impact of the development of personalised learning methodologies on classroom practice and, in particular, their contribution to quality improvement.
City College Norwich

The research conducted by the CCN Research Centre proceeded along four separate lines of information collection:

- Exploratory informal interviews with stakeholders (management staff, pilot project leaders, student leadership, individual teachers).

- Observation of events related to personalisation (student union elections, pilot project preparations, student leadership review of personalisation project). Participant observation was conducted of three events: Pilot project planning, Student governor meeting with Pilot project leaders, Student course representative meeting with Student Union president, Debate of Student Union presidential candidates, Student Union election hustings.

- Questionnaires administered to students, staff and pilot project participants. Three separate questionnaires were sent out seeking the views of staff, students and pilot project participants. A secondary aim of the questionnaires was to develop a sense of the level of preparedness of staff and students for the use of innovative technologies.

- Comparative review of available technological solutions: A blog and a social bookmarking site were established with links to technological solutions used for personalisation and learner advocacy (see bibliography).

- Literature review: A survey of basic literature on personalised learning and learner advocacy was conducted.

Research Findings

Summary

The overwhelming finding of all the activities is the far-reaching nature of the changes accompanying personalisation. These changes affect virtually all the stakeholders: managers, instructors, support staff, student leadership, and above all students. Awareness of the nature of this impact is essential for informed leadership. The complexity of the delivery of a personalisation programme has become obvious. Models of personalisation apply equally to the development of managers and to questions of curriculum design. Regarding the CPD of managers, the research findings suggest that taught leadership programmes do not take the participants on the journey that is needed in today’s environment as they do not identify the real needs of individual leaders by taking on board their personalities, value systems and preferred learning styles.

Responses from managers, staff and students alike confirm that the institutional culture needs to reflect the philosophy of personalisation as ownership of learning at all levels of the institution. Support and resources for personalisation projects are another area where significant tendencies have been observed. The importance of robust and tested guidelines and samples was reported across the board where action research went hand in hand with the development of materials.
Research into technological support for learner voice and work-based learning uncovered a multitude of tools with various levels of suitability. It became clear that attention needs to be paid to real patterns of usage and skill levels of management, staff and students. The world of technology is currently in flux with the introduction of the social element under the heading of Web 2.0. As a result, investing into old tools (existing VLEs) seems to be an inefficient use of resources while new technologies and practices for their use have not yet been established. Many tools and services designed for the personalisation of the online experience and the expression of the individual’s voice in the context of the larger group only succeed partially when actual user behaviour is observed. For instance, ‘Groups’ on social networks such as ‘Facebook’ and ‘Bebo’ usually serve more as a badge of membership or identification with a cause rather than being effective platforms for the representation of an individual’s voice.

On the other hand, VLEs and eILPs (electronic Individualised Learning Plans) are often developed behind closed doors using an outdated non-agile development model that is unresponsive to users’ needs. As a result, it may be incumbent upon educational institutions to join in the development of the appropriate technologies through Open Source initiatives and contribute jointly into the pool of best practices keeping interoperability and agility of development at the centre of attention. As a beneficial side-effect, Open Source project development and management practices may serve as a useful model of managing other types of institutional innovation.

A review of the literature on personalisation and learner self-advocacy has revealed that not all conceptualisations of personalised learning and the representation of the learner in the process are straightforward. There is a difference in emphasis between personalisation efforts in the US and UK. Whereas current UK efforts largely derive from government led initiatives, focus on the pedagogy and take centre-stage, US personalisation projects happen mainly on the margins and focus on eLearning systems as a point of departure. It is important to differentiate personalised learning from e-learning or even distance learning, which is not always the case. Although mentions of personalisation can be traced to the 1970s, recent UK projects have their antecedents in government-driven initiatives that received prominence only in the 21st century (Milliband, 2004; Johnson 2004; Keefe, 2007; Campbell et al. 2007; Jones and Duckett, 2006). Consequently, there is a dearth of peer-reviewed research available for consultation. The activities under investigation here are, in effect, creating new realities that can only be exposed to independent (non-action) research scrutiny later.

Overall, the project activities have born useful information and the processes and effects of integrating the results within institutional practices will form the next action-research challenge ahead of us. The detailed findings are presented in the following categories broadly tracking the original research aims:

- Personalisation of leadership support and development.
- Informing leadership of personalisation activity.
Models of personalisation, differentiation and the learner voice.

Supporting personalisation with technology.

**Personalisation of Leadership Support and Development**

These results are based on the findings of research at NHC. The initial programme entitled “Readiness to Lead” was designed to raise the self awareness and knowledge base of the whole management team. Using the research outcomes from the Personalisation of Learning Programme at LC, the programme was designed to incorporate:

- Visioning;
- Environmental Awareness;
- Communication;
- Advocacy;
- Organisational Understanding;
- Audit and Measurement;
- Self Assessment;
- Risk Taking and Entrepreneurialism;
- Confidence in Learner Empowerment;
- Performance Management;
- Accountability;
- Reflection.

Managers reacted positively to a programme that would enable them to demonstrate the impact of leadership on learning. They were however looking for greater certainty in programme design, content and organisation. Initial findings suggested that most managers would be more satisfied with a traditional leadership modular programme linked to some form of accreditation. These more traditional programmes underpinned leadership in a more stable and less demanding environment. It became necessary therefore to develop a deeper understanding of changing organisation culture, learning preferences and personality type across the management group.

The managers were all relatively new to their roles and even the more experienced managers had limited knowledge of leadership constructs, organisation culture and personality profiling. Therefore, the College decided to measure any change in managers’ receptiveness to the proposed programme following a 4 month intensive personal development process. The process was designed to develop a unique and individual leadership plan for every one of the 45 participating managers. Would such
a programme help leaders to change their perception of what they needed to be effective in delivering personalisation of learning within their areas of influence?

The self discovery tools trialled with all 45 managers included Myers Briggs Type Indicator, Firo-B and Johari Window. One to one interviews with 12 managers revealed a universal liking for the MBT1 (Myers Briggs Type Indicator) approach. Managers felt they had learned new things about themselves that helped inform their thinking about how they operated in an organisation and team environment. The tool had given them a language which they could use to explore their own behaviour and the behaviour of others in a supportive environment. Many wished to use the tool more widely with their teams and with learners.

A residential weekend focused upon organisation culture was developed and delivered by external consultants. Evaluations demonstrated that managers were beginning to see the connectivity between their value system and the value system of an organisation. Personalisation could not be delivered successfully in an organisation where managers did not value student advocacy, flexibility and the more holistic development of every student.

A final strand in the knowledge and awareness raising process was provided by the Work Foundation. Managers who were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the introspective nature of the programme describe this as their light bulb moment. It enabled those managers who had begun to feel that their PLPs lacked context to construct a collective agenda for change. The agenda generated was practical and thoughtful in nature. It demonstrated considerable movement in the thinking of those managers who sought a more traditional diet of an accredited modular leadership programme 6 months earlier.

**Informing Leadership and Best Practice Guidelines**

From the work completed at LC, a number of different findings emerged and areas of good practice were identified for summary and further investigation. In the three different pieces of research activity, the following analysis and reporting mechanisms were used:

- College managers’ views on change and leadership were reported to and discussed at the College’s Personalised Learning Steering Group. The group reflected that more specific enquiry into the practicalities of leadership of personalised learning were necessary and further testing of the management behaviours required in a personalised learning context were necessary.

- The review of quality improvement through personalised learning strategies in the classroom was conducted through lesson observations and discussions with teaching staff on their understanding of how personalised learning would be implemented. The findings were reported to College Governors and to the College’s Personalised Learning Steering Group in March 2008.
This research identified a number of examples of best practice that could form the foundations of future detailed case studies outlined in brief in the next section.

**Models of Personalisation, Differentiation and the Learner Voice**

The findings in this section are based on research at CCN. Both interviews and questionnaire responses indicate that staff tend to understand personalised learning as a means of differentiation. The primary avenue of understanding personalisation is responding to the different abilities and learning styles of students. Staff views of personalisation are generally positive as an idea but a number of them express concerns over its implementation and communication of plans for change. Most respondents have heard of personalisation but given that the number of respondents is rather low, it is safe to assume that their having heard of personalisation is the reason they chose to answer the questionnaire. The prevailing model is that of customisation. Generally absent is any notion of the collective dimension of personalisation (Campbell et al., 2007). There is a high level of awareness that personalised learning as differentiation has significant antecedents, or that it can be equated with commonsense teaching practice.

From an informal video survey conducted by the Student Union, we can see students frequently equating personalised learning with self-study in their own environment (“learning on your own” was a frequent response when asked to guess; the majority of students did not know at first what to imagine under personalisation and had to be prompted to ‘take a guess’). Differentiation was a common response to the suggestion that students should take responsibility (“we all learn differently”). However, students were highly enthusiastic about peer learning and peer support.

The staff written survey showed that the actual experiences of personalisation (outside the personalised learning pilots) were rather limited. When asked to give an example of their experience with students learning something individually, the staff responses centred around remedial education describing either students who needed more attention or those with specific known learning difficulties. The solutions offered were largely limited to mode of explanation, additional materials, or more instruction time such as private tutoring. Respondents suggested that most of their colleagues would do the same with some exceptions particularly those worried about “creating extra work for themselves”. This suggests a relatively high awareness of the need for differentiation of approaches to learning but a low level of awareness of personalisation as ownership of responsibility. This is further compounded by the perception of many that differentiation has always been a part of the repertoire of best teaching practices (“what good teachers always do”).

Predictably, the staff response on institutional support and readiness was much more mixed. Of the 34 respondents to this question, 8 had received little to no information about personalised learning. However, the representativeness of the sample is skewed because the respondents were naturally drawn from people who are already familiar with personalisation and it can be expected that the actual level of staff who have received little or no information is much higher. Respondents also reported having given relatively little feedback to the College leadership. This prompted further
questions about what that feedback could be, the general concern was over the level of resources available for the changes and the methods with which information about the new approaches was distributed.

In general, this portion of the research revealed that there is an insufficient level of public discussion of personalisation and a rather limited view of the role of the learner voice both on the part of the students and the staff. This is in contrast with what was revealed through interviews and questionnaires with participants in the personalised learning pilot projects who consistently reported positive experiences and exhibited a high level of enthusiasm. However, even among the pilot project participants (many of whom received coaching by an expert in personalisation), there was evidence of undue reliance on differentiation by learning style as the primary model of personalisation. Also, echoing the general responses, the personalised pilot project participants agreed on the need for wider consultation and a clearer allocation of resources.

**Supporting Personalisation with Technology**

The findings in this section are based on research done at CCN. Although the original framing of the research was more technical in nature the overwhelming finding from this research is that the introduction of technologies supporting learner advocacy and in particular personalised learning is just as much a matter of leadership approaches as the introduction of personalised learning itself. The preeminent finding (repeated in the conclusions) is that the technology is entirely subservient to the institutional distribution of pedagogies. This is a conclusion agreed by all research partners.

It is possible to deliver personalisation without any technological innovation at all, as proven by LC which decided not to invest in further innovation to support personalisation but rather to rely on their existing VLE. However, research into available technologies suggests that there are many technologies that exhibit a surprising level of convergence with the progressive educational philosophy of personalisation (Campbell et al. 2007). However, these technologies do not offer ready-made solutions but rather an approach to technological innovation and a philosophy of development. In particular, the so called Web2.0 movement provides many points of inspiration, especially when combined with the Open Source ethos. But even here, leadership and organisational structures play a paramount role, particularly since both staff and student readiness to accept new technologies are lower than might be expected.

In interviews with staff working on personalisation projects, all but one could not think of a way that technology could improve their project. However, in accordance with the philosophy of Web2.0, many asked for simple, single purpose tools with options for personalisation. For instance, the school-made eILP was praised in contrast to the much maligned Blackboard VLE.

The staff questionnaire posed a question about what they would do if they only had to teach using the internet (or to suggest an ideal balance between online and offline instruction)? What was surprising was the general hostility of the responses. Only
several respondents truly tried to imagine an alternative. The predominant answer was to dismiss such a scenario out of hand or to suggest that a different job would be preferable in such an instance. A number of respondents suggested a 70/30% ratio in favour of face-to-face instruction and there was a high awareness of subject dependence. Some respondents reacted as if the questionnaire actually suggested that this was going to be the policy of the future, which indicates a relatively high level of mistrust of official policies and initiatives – an impression backed up by other responses to the questionnaire.

Also, the level of peer learning among staff seems to be relatively low. When asked to state the last time they learned to do something online for the benefit of their students from a colleague, several respondents replied never, and others suggested that the learning usually emanates from them (this seemed to be due to a relatively high proportion of respondents from the School of Computing). More respondents reported extensive self-learning and use of online informational resources. No one reported the use of a Web2.0 technology or a social network.

Similarly, findings from observation of student representatives during Student Union elections and interviews with selected representatives of the student leadership suggested a relatively low level of awareness of alternatives to “traditional” VLEs, despite the relatively high use of social networks like Bebo and Facebook. Observation of the actual use of social networking revealed that this is due to specific patterns of usage of social networks. Social networks seem to be encroaching into the domain of email and instant messaging rather than online communication like discussion forums. The use of new technologies can also lead to more conservative pedagogies necessary to accommodate the limits of what a particular solution can do. Two examples are the use of video and the overreliance on multiple choice questions in online testing due to the ease of machine correction. On the other hand, significant non-formal learning, including acquisition of specific technical skills as well as the ‘soft-skills’ of personal development, seems to be happening in the online space for which there are no avenues of recognition at the moment.

Finally, the institutional context for introducing innovative technologies was discovered to be unsatisfactory at CCN. Although, there are number of drivers of innovation there are no structures of support for innovation and neither are there straightforward ways of integrating a diversity of solutions into a single institutional framework, a prerequisite of successful innovation. This is due to the consolidation of all responsibilities for ICT provision under the control of an IT department whose primary responsibility is to maintain the stability of the existing infrastructure which is antithetical to the principles of innovation.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Personalisation of Leadership Support and Development

The research at NHC shows that leadership development activities enabled the College to gain a better understanding of the challenges involved in building a personalisation model of leadership. In particular:

- Personalisation in Leadership required a medium-sized FE college to provide a high level of investment in managers understanding of self, organisation culture, and personalisation itself.

- Good use of psychometric tests enables managers to prioritise opportunities and training that will impact on their behaviour and values as well as knowledge and understanding.

- Managers often seek certainty in an environment that is volatile and uncertain. Personalisation requires managers to undertake development and training that is experiential in nature and uncertain in outcome.

- Managers can become uncomfortable with development which is too focused on the individual. To deliver personalisation in a college environment, it is important to make the connection between individual leadership planning, learner success and college and team performance. Evidence from the PLPs completed by 45 managers suggests that most managers still prioritise knowledge (rather than attributes) as the route to leadership success.

- At NHC, 45 managers have completed Phase 1 of a Leadership Development Programme. Each has a Personalised Leadership Plan and has identified a range of experiences and training that will strengthen their confidence in delivering personalisation in learning. There would be value in tracking the progress of these managers to discover which elements of their experience and taught programme have most impact in their leadership development.

- This initial research into personalisation of leadership confirms the need for leaders to ‘freeze’ a position in time. They need to develop a new mindset to enable them to assess the value of new tools and new training paradigms in their leadership development. More research into the value and efficacy of this approach would inform future development.

- Costs of delivering the Personalised Leadership Plans that encourage leaders to develop through a wide range of experiential learning opportunities will be higher than the more traditional ‘batch process’ management delivery processes.

- It is important that all managers have an effective mentor. The mentor should be familiar with culture and values of the organisation. It is clear that those with an experienced mentor were getting more from the programme.
The Personalised Leadership Plans have taken individual career planning to improved levels. They do however need refinement. They will need to change as the definition of personalisation evolves.

All interviewees saw the potential of the programme as a powerful strategy to enable learning for themselves and change for the organisation. The momentum will only be maintained if the College delivers the experiential opportunities identified in the PLPs.

Models of Personalisation and the Learner Voice

There is no doubt that, as one senior manager put it, “all teachers want to be successful” and do the best for the success of their students. However, they also work within the parameters of their employment contract and many have seen similar drives before. Many aspects of the current personalisation initiatives can be traced as far back as Dewey’s laboratory schools and even Rousseau’s thought experiments more than two centuries ago. Teachers are well aware of the possible disparities between intended and actual outcomes of institutional reform.

One solution is to apply personalisation to staff as well as students. Asked what information he received, one staff member responded: “We have not had very much information - I believe we were treated to a blue PowerPoint on it recently, but it has made little impression on me. These corporate PowerPoint-based presentations are never very engaging. Perhaps they could be personalised?” When combined with the following statement by David Milliband (2004): “Personalised learning can only be developed school by school. It cannot be imposed from above”, it might be possible to suggest that personalised learning needs to be developed classroom by classroom, teacher by teacher, student by student.

However, both student and staff responses in our project seem to indicate a perception that personalisation is something imposed on them rather than organically growing out of their need. This is in stark contrast to the positive responses many students and staff who participated in successful personalisation activities. Contrast the response of a teacher participating in a personalised learning pilot at CCN: “There is no limit to the freedom a learner can negotiate, in developing themselves and their work.” The key challenge of personalisation leadership is to expose the staff and student body to these positive experiences of personalisation while taking into account their concerns.

This is one area in which technology can play a greater role. Blogging and social networking has proven to be an effective tool for establishing institutional cultures and public relations. Web2.0 technology can be used to help teachers share practices within as well as outside the institution. However, as the research indicates, this can only be successful if a truly open communication culture is fostered and the importance of this communication is supported by the allocation of resources such as developer support and extra time for the communication of reflected practice (Schón, 1983).
One of the obstacles in the path of personalisation was perceived to be the current centralised system of qualifications. Profound personalisation (Jones and Ducket, 2006) will provide a challenge to awarding bodies. More flexible qualification structures will be required for personalisation to succeed. Other changes include changes in the funding where money follows the learner, but also changes in the buildings in which learning takes place, changes in the nature of curriculum, and changes in the working relationships educational institutions have with employers. It is inconceivable to assume that such far-reaching changes would be possible without a change in the leadership approach, as well.

**Using technology to Support Personalisation**

Technology is an essential element of personalisation but it cannot be the only solution; perhaps it should not even be central to the success of any pedagogic solutions; It may be necessary in some instances (e.g. mobile notifications, video recordings of lectures) but it should never be sufficient to the pedagogies; For example, there are many instances where the use of technology forces teachers into very traditional pedagogies.

The research found no readily available technological solution to support personalisation and student advocacy; however, it can recommend a type of solution that combines the best features of different types of implementations. The recommendation is to combine a hybrid solution relying on a backbone of Open Source, locally-hosted client/server solution supported by in-house development adding institution specific features strongly associated with the Open Source projects community supplemented by externally hosted generic services. An example here would be Moodle hosting online course presence combined with the social networking power of Drupal or Elgg using a combination of YouTube and Mediasite to host videos. Proprietary solutions can be implemented where no Open Source alternative exists. This environment can be supported by institutional user groups who can even contribute to development. High priority should be given to leveraging open APIs of hosted services used by staff and students like Facebook, MySpace or YouTube. For instance, students can receive notification of new assignments via their Facebook or Bebo account or can submit some work within MySpace as part of their assignment.

Any implementation should take account of the following principles:

- Does the solution provide sufficient access to source code or an Application Programming Interface (API) to make customisation possible?
- Is the code open and compliant with open standards (e.g. SCORM, etc.)?
- Is data portable and stored in compliance with open standards?
- Is there an active community of developers and users driving the development of the technology forward?
- Is there institutional support for the implementation of the solution?
However, recognition should be given to key requirements on technology expressed by students: 1. be informed of scheduling changes, 2. have reliable and predictable access to course materials. Any technological solution will have to start from these core principles if it is to be successful in its more ambitious aims. Again, these are really matters of institutional support and leadership rather than purely technology.

**Areas of Further Study**

The research activity at LC identified a number of unresolved issues and established further lines of enquiry for the implementation of the College’s Personalised Learning initiative. These findings were confirmed by results from the other two partners:

- Where else has Personalisation worked well?
- How do we rate our staff’s “buy in” to Personalisation?
- Is there any residual confusion regarding Personalisation? If so, why?
- What aspects about it have our staff found most challenging?
- Has Personalisation been an extra burden to our staff…or has it helped them?
- Why is this the case... and what effect has it had?

Furthermore, research is needed into the relationship between personalisation and technology, in particular:

- The effects of emergent technologies on student learning; particularly the effects of the so called Web2.0 with its emphasis on social interactions and user-generated content.
- Effective introduction and implementation of new technologies in prevailing technological environment.
- Reliable methods of gathering information about student interactions with emergent technologies; including observation, analysis of interactions, friendship groups.

**References**


The Development of a Regional Learner Panel: Involving “Everyday Learners” in Leadership

Dr Colin Forrest, LSC Yorkshire and the Humber and Lisa Keenan, People in Action, Leeds

Executive Summary

A regional learner panel has been established in Yorkshire and Humber comprising LSC-funded learners from a range of backgrounds and experience. This research report locates the evolution of the panel in the context of national developments and explores how such a group can contribute to leadership in the learning and skills sector. The findings highlight tensions regarding the autonomy of the panel and ownership of the agenda and discussions. While the dynamics of the panel proved to be highly complex, they also provided a setting to develop two concepts in particular. The research suggests that the workings of the panel represent many elements of a community of practice which provides a means of legitimising the growth of individual panel members as leaders. The panel also characterises facets of distributed leadership where group activity brings synergy to the contributions of individual members. In concluding, the authors highlight that effective facilitation of such panels is key to the development of the group and individuals within it. They caution however that such panels must be only part of a range of methods to access learner voice and to develop learners as leaders.

Introduction

This research project follows the development of the Regional Learner Panel (RLP) in Yorkshire and the Humber. This panel was established in the summer of 2007 and funded by the regional Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Sixteen members were successful in the competitive recruitment to the panel. Members are aged from 18-89 and are all engaged in LSC-funded learning, including apprenticeships, Personal and Community Development Learning (PCDL), and Further Education (FE). The panel was originally conceived in order to assist in the implementation of policy affecting post-16 learning in the region and as a complementary forum to the National Learner Panel (NLP) established the previous year to “give learners a say in the development of further education at a national level” (Directgov 2007). Part of the funding is to support the facilitation of the panel by the members of the regional team of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE).
The initial focus of the research was intended to explore the following key research questions in the context of the development of the RLP:

- How do recent developments in capturing learner voice link to policy making?
- What is the relationship between the regional learner panel and the work of the national learner panel?
- What development needs exist for panel members if they are to influence emerging policy?
- What is the relationship between key concepts that relate to the area of ‘learner voice’?

The dynamics of the RLP proved to be far more complex than originally anticipated and the time taken for the panel to develop underestimated. This is an interesting finding in itself but had potential to compromise collecting data to address the specific research questions outlined above. Nevertheless, the panel was a most fruitful area for research which subsequently moved away from some of the research questions. The new focus was on: exploring the panel’s development in terms of its impact on stakeholders, the role of communications and using the emerging findings to suggest tentatively how such groups may establish a leadership role in informing developments in post-16 learning. It is in this latter area that it is hoped the research can make a significant contribution in a rapidly moving context.

The issue of student voice in post-16 learning is developing strongly across a number of dimensions. In February 2007, the LSC published guidance for FE colleges to establish learner involvement strategies (LSC 2007) from September 2007. This includes an introduction from the NLP for learner involvement to “become a key driver of every provider’s quality improvement system”. The Framework for Excellence is moving towards the end of its pilot phase and there has been significant development on the ‘responsiveness to learners’ dimension of the Framework (LSC 2008). The Framework operates at provider level and the score for the responsiveness dimension is based on the analysis of responses to learner surveys based on the LSC’s national learner survey. These questions cover the following aspects:

- information, advice and guidance;
- quality of teaching and training;
- overall satisfaction with the learning experience;
- satisfaction with the level of support available;
- whether learners are treated fairly and with respect;
- opportunities to give feedback about how providers can improve;
- whether the provider is responsive to learners’ views.
Issues that have arisen during the piloting include understanding and exploring links between these quantitative data and qualitative information that may be held within the provider. The implications of response rates and the potentially time consuming nature of completing the survey are also explored.

The national context for enhancing and supporting the roles of learners/students as leaders is developing strongly. Research commissioned by HTI (Patey undated), in the context of developing the leadership of 14-19 learners, provides a comprehensive synthesis of the developing policy environment. The findings tease out issues that have significance for this research project, including highlighting that leadership opportunities need to be available for all, not just the articulate and vocal, and also the importance of leadership in a team setting.

The leadership role of post-16 learners is being strongly supported by CEL. ‘Leading the Learner Voice Awards’ for 2008 is heavily marketed using a range of categories, including individual learners and organisational leaders. Significantly, new categories have been introduced to reflect the leadership role in enhancing social cohesion, interfaith understanding and ensuring opportunity and access for all. CEL also provides training for student leaders, which embraces two dimensions: the contemporary policy context and developing essential skills and capabilities. The need to develop these two aspects will be returned to later in the research. CEL have recently published (2008) guidance on recruiting student governors which emphasises the need for a supportive architecture for student involvement but also one that has recognition and ownership at all levels in the organisation. Learner voice is also a key theme of CEL research and publications (e.g. Collinson 2007).

The current research is intended to develop an understanding of learner voice outside individual institutions through, for example, learner panels. There is little in the literature that outlines the key theoretical issues that need developing in such a context and in the following section a brief attempt is made to develop the outline of an appropriate theoretical framework that allows the leadership implications of learner voice to be developed in such settings.

**Research Framework**

In the introductory section above, key developments in both student responsiveness and the development of students as leaders have been highlighted. In defining the former, the Framework for Excellence considers organisational success through surveys which capture the sum of personal success. ‘Learner Voice’ however is closely linked to the development of ‘personalisation’ and in this latter context West-Burnham (in de Freitas and Yapp 2005:25) defines four central characteristics of leadership:

- Leadership is fundamentally concerned with change, innovation and creativity;
- Leadership is a moral activity, it is concerned with the translation of principle into practice;
Leadership is about direction and purpose;

Leadership is rooted in effective human relationships.

These are all key elements that are relevant to the current research. The final aspect links closely with the position of Macmurray (Fielding 2006a) who defines encounters with other people as ‘functional’ or ‘personal’. Functional encounters are instrumental in nature and relate to ‘getting things done’, personal encounters are characterised by collaboration and cooperation. The setting of a learner panel represents potential for this joint activity and is characterised by a relationship between both the functional and personal. Panel members may not be participating to enhance their own learning, but their involvement may be more altruistic and relies on making changes through persuasion and argument.

There are links between this collegiate model with the concept of distributed leadership. A uniform definition is hard to capture from the literature and this may, in part, be due to a central paradox in that leadership tends to be associated with individuals some of whom, in a group setting, will be more influential than others (Sheard and Kakabades 2007). Gronn (2002) characterises distributed leadership as that emerging from a group of interacting individuals. Furthermore, he identifies the potential for added value through such an approach where the impact of the collective is greater than the individuals. There are links between elements of distributed leadership and the development of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). Communities of practice have at their core the very process of learning itself, not only of individuals but, significantly for the research, also of groups. In doing so the concept supports the importance given above to collaborative activity.

A community of practice has several dimensions including: a joint enterprise, in the context of learner panels this technical feature is likely to provide the focus for change that is outlined by West Burnham. The second dimension of a community of practice: mutual engagement takes the involvement from defining what the issues are into actions that will make a difference. Applying this would require the panel to work collaboratively to a shared purpose. This collaboration results in a shared repertoire that carries the common knowledge of the community linked to joint activity and it is likely that the external players to the community of practice may also influence this shared repertoire or create the impetus for the cooperative activity. This can be extended to the sharing of resources amongst the community of practice that can add to the advancement of the group.

Spender and Grinyer (1996) identify that the informal nature of communities of practice have potential to interfere with formal systems that may be represented by policy makers with whom the panel members may be interacting. Community relationships have a focus around practice, where authority comes from expertise, not organisational status and where processes are defined from within the community of practice.
Lesser and Storck (2001) highlight that, significantly, communities of practice have the capability to inject pace into change, as compared to a slowly moving traditional hierarchy. Muller (2006) identifies that communities of practice may provide the setting for building up of leadership by individuals developing their reputation through consensus within a community of practice, thus perhaps partially resolving the paradox inherent in some authors’ definitions of distributed leadership.

The literature outlines two models that may be helpful in defining the characteristics of the learner panel in terms of its position on continua of participation. That put forward by Hart (1992) for young people has eight elements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of participation</th>
<th>Type of involvement</th>
<th>Level of engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manipulation</td>
<td>Learners are directed by staff and tend not to be informed of the issues. Learners may be asked to ‘rubberstamp’ decisions already taken by staff.</td>
<td>Non participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decoration</td>
<td>Learners may be indirectly involved in decisions or ‘campaigns’ but they are not fully aware of their Rights, their possible involvement or how decisions might affect them.</td>
<td>Non participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informing</td>
<td>Learners are merely informed of action and changes but their views are not actively sought.</td>
<td>Non participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation</td>
<td>Learners are kept fully informed and encouraged to express their opinions but have little or no impact on outcomes.</td>
<td>Tokenism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hart defines these quite closely through the use of examples and there are also close links with the framework constructed by Rudd et al (2006).
These frameworks are designed to capture participation in the context of learners and their own institutions, nevertheless they provide useful structures in which to locate the work of the regional learner panel.

Such concepts also need to be examined against the researchers’ epistemological perspectives. One of the researchers is an employee of the regional LSC and has written previously about tensions between quality improvement, based on cultural change, and effectiveness, characterised by quantifiable outcomes, in educational settings (Forrest et al 2007). In articulating these tensions the position of this researcher is located in exploring the potential of the panel to be emancipatory for its members and illuminating issues uncovered through quantitative techniques like learner surveys. This researcher identifies closely with the views of Fielding (2006b) but acknowledges that this position may well conflict with his involvement in the development of the learner panel from a professional perspective. The need to distance this researcher from the primary research is identified in the research methods section below.

**Research Methods**

Two researchers were involved with this project. One, a LSC employee is directly involved with the operation and development of the regional and national learner panel and the other, from a partner organisation, has significant experience in the field of learner voice and has attended meetings of the panel. The involvement of the researcher from the partner organisation was crucial to the research as she was known to panel members and had attended the majority of the meetings but was not

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Placation</th>
<th>Learners are consulted and informed. Learners views are listened to in order to inform the decision making process but this does not guarantee any changes learners may have wanted.</th>
<th>Tokenism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partnership</td>
<td>Learners are consulted and informed in decision making processes. Outcomes are the result of negotiations between staff and learners.</td>
<td>Tokenism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delegated power</td>
<td>Staff still inform agenda for action but learners are given responsibility for managing aspects or all of any initiatives or programmes that result. Decisions are shared with staff.</td>
<td>Learner empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner control</td>
<td>Learners initiate agendas and are given responsibility and power for management of issues and to bring about change. Power is delegated to learners and they are active in designing their education.</td>
<td>Learner empowerment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
directly linked to the operation of the panel so was more of an ‘outsider’. This enabled a degree of research distance to be maintained thus reducing the potential for the participants’ responses and the research findings to be compromised. The participants’ responses could be kept confidential as the questions were framed by someone external from the panel.

Research data were collected from two sources. Documents, including notes of panel meetings and discussions were studied, and semi-structured interviews were undertaken; these were conducted on the telephone; via email and face to face. Using this format allowed the areas identified by the research questions to be explored, whilst also allowing other issues to be developed by the research participants. It was important that the work of the panel was interpreted in relation to meanings assigned by the participants in the research, and as such the research was largely qualitative in nature. Robson (2002) identifies that such an approach is appropriate where studying individual perceptions within a social unit.

The areas covered by the questions were predetermined. This was done in consultation between the two researchers and was based on issues arising from notes of previous meetings of the RLP and areas covered by the evaluation of the national learner panel (SHM 2007). Key areas included exploring panel members’ motivation for becoming involved, their perceived role of the panel, their expectations, links with other groups including the National Learner Panel, impact, and communications. Participants were also invited to make contributions on aspects outside these areas. The general areas were shared with the participants beforehand.

The research participants included the chair of the RLP, other members of the RLP, members of the LSC, and the facilitator of the National Learner Panel. Considerable time was given to informing the participants about the purpose and nature of the research. It was recognised by the researchers that the panel members are volunteers who devote considerable time and energy to their work and it was important that the research represented minimal extra burden.

Access to the research participants was facilitated by the researchers’ varying degrees of proximity to the operation of the panel. Relationships had already been established and contacts made, a rich understanding of the research context was in place and it is hoped that the researchers had credibility with the research participants. The researchers however were very aware of the potential conflicts that might arise in such a situation and it was acknowledged that the dual insider-outsider approach advocated by Thomas et al (2000) would be helpful in minimising such issues. Full records have been kept of participants’ responses allowing for the interpretation of the findings to be checked against the raw data.

At a RLP meeting, members of the panel were informed about the research including: the areas it would cover; the timescales; who would be approached to be involved; and the possibility of publication. During this meeting panel members were also informally invited to participate in the research. Following this meeting a formal written invitation was sent to each of the panel members further outlining the purpose of the study, methods of using the data, confidentiality, how the findings would be used and
contact details. These written invitations took account of the British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA 2007) and published models were used to draw up the invitation (Oxford Brooks University 2007, Robson 2002).

Notes of panel meetings and workshops were also part of the research data. This allowed for some exploration of the relationships between the panel members and policy makers and others attending the meeting. All documents produced by the regional learner panel and some of those from the national learner panel have also been used to inform the emerging findings. Draft documents presented to the panel have also been used within the research to measure the impact of the panel’s comments.

The research approaches outlined were helpful in producing a rich variety of research evidence however undertaking the research proved to be much more time consuming than anticipated. Complementary methods were considered and the use of a ‘focus’ group was given serious consideration. This would have had the advantage of introducing potential checks and balances as well allowing participants’ thoughts to be refined in the light of discussions. Discussion might have embraced other areas not suggested by the semi structured questions. The main constraint on not using this approach was that it would have been necessary to use some time set aside for panel meetings for this activity and this may have been seen as a distraction. The researchers are also very aware that such groups need very skilful facilitation to ensure a full representation of views.

Research Findings

The findings have been grouped under four themes: purpose of the panel, communications, impact and outcomes.

1. Purpose, role and remit of the RLP

Panel members and stakeholders were asked if they felt that the purpose, role and remit of the RLP was clear and what their understanding of it was. This remit was defined at the two day residential meeting of the panel following the initial recruitment. All panel members see the panel’s strong relationship with the LSC and how it can influence the work they are doing, but they also felt strongly that the panel should have an active role in setting the agenda; challenging assumptions; and leading on issues. One panel member observed that,

“The main aims are to highlight issues in the region and try and find a solution to them. Also, a major role is to comment on documents and materials regarding the policy being implemented in the region.”

While panel members have a common understanding of this aim, there is a lack of clarity when discussions become more detailed. Of the panel members interviewed, almost all stated that its purpose was unclear from the outset. Panel members spoke about initial confusion around who was setting the agenda and what was appropriate for the panel to discuss. From the beginning, the LSC were keen to encourage panel
members to take the lead in setting the agenda and the direction of the panel. This led to the group spending some time in the initial meetings working out what areas they would look at and how they would work. Some of the panel’s suggestions and activities could be construed as lobbying of government and policy makers. This generated considerable debate amongst panel members as the LSC perspective on the role of the panel was not to fund campaigning and lobbying activity as there were representative organisations, like the National Union of Students, who are already involved in that work.

The majority of the panel felt happy with this, but some felt that the LSC were policing the panel. While the aim to give the panel autonomy and encourage the group to be self-governing and explore their own priorities is commendable, it has led to confusion among members. In not giving a clear framework for the panel to work within, the LSC gave the impression that there were no set boundaries and that the panel could decide entirely what work they would be involved in. When LSC’s boundaries were made clear to the panel at the official launch, some members felt they were being constrained. One respondent stated,

“Some panel members feel that meetings are being led by LSC, especially the launch, but I felt I got my own view across.”

But once the LSC’s broad requirements were made clear, further panel meetings helped to provide more clarity on the function of the panel and have led to the development of a clearer structure for meetings. This emerging clarity is reflected in the comments made by panel members about the function of the RLP. One panel member commented,

“I believe various panel members have different views […] I would like to think it acts as a means of channelling learners’ views into the policy making decisions of both the LSC and teaching institutions.”

And another felt that the panel existed,

“To make an active difference by providing the chance for lots of learners from different backgrounds to give opinions about learning and learning opportunities.”

There was also early confusion about the panel’s membership; members were unclear about whether they were to take into account the views of fellow, non-panel learners and some felt they had a representative role on the panel. There are still some questions about how this role is to be defined and whether it is appropriate for the views of other learners to feed into the regional panel. The RLP is not an elected membership and therefore the panel members are not representatives. The model of non-elected membership is one valued by those involved as it is seen as a means to gather the views of a more diverse group of learners rather than just those who would have traditionally been more attracted to a leadership role. As one learner put it,
"Everyday learners get to give their opinions based on their own experiences."

The findings suggest that there is a need for further clarity so that panel members can feel confident of their role and have realistic expectations about what can be achieved.

At the setting up stages of the RLP, draft terms of reference were established to help the panel create a clear statement about the purpose of the panel and to determine their role. However, to date, there are no agreed terms of reference for the RLP. This has led to a lot of confusion about the role and purpose of the panel for both the panel members and external stakeholders. Even at this stage it is difficult to define with certainty the role of the regional panel. The LSC wish the panel to be a reference group, working alongside policy makers to inform and influence policy. Panel members have also said that they feel the panel is there to comment on and inform policy, but as yet these aims have not been made explicit through terms of reference or other RLP documents.

2. Communications

Panel members believed that the RLP did not have a high enough profile and were keen to address this in coming months. One panel member sums up the main concerns,

“There hasn’t been a lot of press or publicity and a google search will only give about three results, a lot lower than NLP. The RLP’s Profile is a lot lower than the National Learner Panel and this will affect who knows about us. A lot of people and organisations don’t know that we exist, let alone what we do.”

The launch of the RLP with the panel receiving endorsement from the Regional Minister for Yorkshire and the Humber generated a lot of publicity. This, together with the work and promotion by the panel, has led to increased awareness,

“People are starting to get to know what the RLP does, I used to have to explain every time, but now more and more people have heard of us.”

Many different organisations have attended panel meetings suggesting that the Panel’s profile is reasonably high among educational professionals. The panel has had contact with the Regional and National LSC, NIACE, CEL, NUS, and the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) and it is clear that these organisations find the Regional Panel a useful resource.

The RLP has discussed the possibility of undertaking a ‘road show’ around the region. One participant also suggested that it would be useful for the panel to produce a newsletter that could be sent to other learners and organisations containing information about what the panel had been doing and their plans for the future.
Panel members receive information about forthcoming meetings via emails and in writing. Most panel members feel that they receive enough information to participate in meetings in a meaningful way. Concerns were raised that they did not receive minutes promptly from the facilitator and there were worries about the impact that this may have on panel members’ engagement.

“There should be prompt circulation of minutes of meetings. This would help to consolidate the thinking of members who had attended and would help to keep non-attenders feeling involved. It may also encourage more communication amongst members between meetings and generally improve momentum.”

There were also concerns raised about not getting the dates of forthcoming meetings early enough and the effect this has had on attendance. Attendance has been relatively low for several meetings and respondents felt that panel members who miss one meeting did not get to find out what happened until weeks or months later and so would be more likely to disengage from the panel.

One panel member also expressed that it was difficult to get hold of past papers and suggested that it would be useful to have a central resource where all relevant documents were stored. This would make it easier for people to keep up-to-date with the progress of the panel and the work that has been done.

The RLP meetings are chaired by a member of the panel and all participants felt that the chair did an excellent job. Everybody felt it was imperative that the meetings were chaired by a learner and this helped the learners to have more ownership of the panel.

The relationship with the National Learner Panel is still unclear. Members of both panels have met up and informally discussed the work of each panel, but there is no formal mechanism for communicating the outcomes of each panel. One panel noted,

“We have met up (RLP and NLP) and shared experiences, but I’m not sure how it works yet.”

Both panels are in their infancy and are finding their own direction and so the relationship between the two panels has not been fully developed. One of the facilitators of the NLP describes the current relationship,

“The chair of RLP does a great job and the NLP has had a lot of informal contact with the RLP through him; but communications tend to be opportunistic and ad hoc rather than thought through and structured.”

As the Yorkshire and Humber RLP is a pilot it would be useful to spend time formalising the relationship with the National Learner Panel to aid other regional panels if they are rolled out across the country.
While the panel have commented on several papers and had conversations with various professionals it has not received any formal feedback on how their advice has been implemented,

“I’d like to know more about how the learner panel is being promoted and also to know the results of what we’ve been doing. We give information and our views to people but we don’t always find out how this information is used or where it’s going.”

This information could be used to inform others about the work of the panel. But more importantly, the information could inform the planning for the panel and used as a clear indicator of the impact they have made.

3. Impact of the regional learner panel

Most respondents felt that they had ample input in setting the agenda and felt confident that they could get an item on the agenda if they wanted. The chair was very happy with how the agenda was agreed and was always asked when another organisation wanted to attend the panel.

Not all of the participants from the panel felt happy about how the agenda was set and one panel member felt they had ‘scarcely’ any input in setting the agenda and that the Panel’s agenda was dominated by professionals giving presentations.

“At every meeting we seem to be bombarded by professionals queuing up to tell us things with little time given for them to listen to us[…] I believe more focus and more constructive discussions could be achieved were the agenda not so cluttered.”

The panel has commented on draft versions of several documents including:

- LSC’s Framework for Excellence;
- LSC’s National Learner Survey;
- LSC’s Learner Involvement Strategy;
- LSC’s commissioning plan.

Panel members welcomed the opportunity to comment on these papers but were unsure about how much their comments were taken into account.

“They listen to us and value what we say as a panel, but we haven’t found out about any changes.”

Some RLP members were concerned that fellow panel members were unsure of the purpose of the panel and that in some cases this could slow down the meeting,
Some panel members felt that it would be useful if discussions were framed better, that if they had clear information about what they could and could not influence, discussions would be more focussed. Perhaps when setting the agenda it would be useful to give information about how much influence the panel could have and whether the paper was at the beginning of the process when everything could be changed, or near the end when only tweaking could be achieved. Guests could be more clearly introduced so that the panel could get the most out of presentations and could understand why they were receiving the presentation and what impact they could have on the area of work.

4. Outcomes

All panel members felt that being a member of the RLP had increased their knowledge of issues in FE and the work of the LSC. Most panel members felt their confidence had grown and valued the experience of formal meetings and talking to professionals and having access to decision makers.

At this moment in time there are fewer tangible outcomes from the work of the panel. That said, the keenness of educational professionals to attend the panel meetings is testament to the fact that they find this learner voice mechanism useful. Panel members, on the whole, feel listened to and are growing in confidence about the impact they could potentially have. One panel member talked about extending the reach of the forum and asking local authorities to involve the panel in their decision making. It is important to note that professionals should use the regional panel as one way to involve learners, not the only way. There is a danger that the panel could be seen as ‘ready made’ involvement in the easy and familiar format of group meetings.

The RLP has had an additional outcome in that it has galvanised the creation of the Sub-regional Humber Apprenticeships Learner Panel. While this panel is still in its infancy it has already developed a core membership, key objectives, a clear meeting structure and fed into the National Review of Apprenticeships. This sub-regional panel has had some infrastructure support from employers but, to date, it does not have its own budget.

Panel members expressed concerns that they had not achieved more in the time the panel had been set up. Some felt that it had been very slow to get started and establish a structure and that this could have been facilitated better.
“I thought it would be more structured, that learner’s issues would be identified at the beginning and then a work plan formed about how to take these issues forward. That these issues would form the agenda, but this wasn’t what happened. But I have had an active input into LSC papers, particularly the framework for excellence.”

Participants also voiced that the lack of progress was further hampered by the infrequency of meetings.

But all members of the panel interviewed remain resolutely committed to the panel and feel that it has an important role to play in putting forward learner views.

“I still believe the Panel can play a valuable role in giving an outlet for the Learner Voice, which is why I joined in the first place; but we are still at a very embryonic stage so that I think this survey is premature.”

There is optimism about the future of the panel and what it can achieve as they continue with a clearer framework and the meetings follow a more transparent and easy to understand structure,

“Although it has taken us a long time to find our feet, we can clearly see that we are getting there.”

“The panel brings a diverse set of experiences and are able to give views as ‘everyday people’ and to look at policies from a different perspective of the professionals.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings suggest that it is important to acknowledge explicitly the ‘players’ in the work of the learner panel if the development of leadership amongst such groups is to be enhanced. There are the learners themselves, including the chair and vice chair, the regional Learning and Skills Council and the facilitator making up a close group that are regularly in contact. There are then other individuals and organisations that make links with the panel on a regular but on a somewhat unstructured basis. In this setting the panel and individual members have had meetings and conversations with senior government ministers and other major players in the development of policy. The chair of the panel, for example, has been invited to attend (as an observer) the regional LSC council. This suggests that the panel must be perceived to be contributing to a leadership role and that the establishment of such a group provides the architecture for this high level engagement. The existence of the panel legitimises such engagement and has potential to provide a ‘one stop shop’ for such dialogue.

The findings suggest that the use of the concept of community of practice in developing an understanding of the regional learner panel and how it might contribute to leadership may be potentially helpful. The chair of the panel has a high reputation within and outside the community of the panel. He also has legitimacy within the
community of practice through working as an ambassador for the panel and making
links with the National Learner Panel. Similar roles have been adopted by other panel
members when speaking to groups and conferences.

The findings highlight important tensions regarding the autonomy of the panel and
ownership of the agenda and discussions. If the existence of a community of practice
is suggested then some homogeneity around the ‘joint enterprise’ of the panel should
exist. The findings suggest that this was only beginning to be put in place. Yet the
tensions also highlight the possible existence of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’.
At one panel meeting when the relationship between the LSC’s commissioning plan
and the government’s grant letter was outlined one panel member articulated that,
as an adult learner, she did not feel she had a role to play on the panel. Taking this
position has significant leadership implications as those at the periphery of a
community of practice have the greatest potential to bring novel solutions from
outside the community to bear on existing problems.

The findings are interesting in the development of distributed leadership through the
regional learner panel. The research framework section of this report drew attention
to Gronn’s (2002) view of distributed leadership in providing ‘concertive action’ – the
added value of joint rather than individual activity. There is clearly evidence of this
happening through the work of the learner panel and the panel may have potential to
represent a powerful combination of legitimising the development of individuals as
leaders and providing synergy from a diverse group of individuals working together.

The continua suggested by Hart (1992) and Rudd et al (2006) imply that it is
desirable to move through their respective phases to the equivalent of the ‘learner
empowerment’ state. Certainly, at this stage in its development, the regional learner
panel is some way from the ultimate position. The findings suggest that there are
some strong elements of Rudd et al’s ‘tokenism’ (probably ‘placation’) and Hart’s
‘consultation but informed’ in the dynamics that currently characterise the panel.
This also raises the issue of development and training for panel members. Some
panel members and the panel’s facilitator attended DIUS organised training session
on the contemporary policy context which was perceived as helpful. The CEL
‘Student Leaders Programme’ highlights the importance of having such
understanding complemented by the development of influencing skills to bring about
change in the learning and skills sector. The findings suggest that such development
is also important in group settings if such groups are going to make the transition
along the continua outlined above. There is also potential for panel members to
become researchers as well as research participants.

Although the regional learner panel is at a relatively early stage in its development, the
findings suggest several recommendations for organisations and individuals involved
in similar enterprises. Reference was made above to the ‘close players’ in the panel:
the members, the sponsor and the facilitator. It is important that mutual expectations
are articulated clearly and understood. On reflection, the role of the facilitator is much
more significant than originally appreciated. The servicing of the panel, in terms of
domestic arrangements etc, is clearly important but there is a significant brokerage
role as well. This represents a challenge in ensuring that the expectations of the sponsoring body and the panel members are met. This includes not only having a profound understanding of the contemporary policy context but also the development needs of individuals and the panel as a group and the development needs of the sponsor too. This does not necessarily mean the establishment of a rigid framework for such groups as the environment of communities of practice is dynamic and constantly evolving so some ambiguity may be helpful. It is most important to acknowledge the role that legitimate peripheral participation can play in this context.

If seeing the panel as a community of practice is helpful in developing an understanding of the leadership role of such groups then it is crucial to appreciate that the richness of such communities resides in the time that members spend together. This highlights another role of the facilitator; that of supporting communications between panel members and enhancing the cohesion of the community of practice between formal meetings. The facilitator has established an on-line community of practice and this is potentially significant in the development of this aspect of the panel’s work.

The findings suggest that a perceived lack of continuity between meetings of the panel has considerable potential to impact negatively. If Lave’s and Wenger’s construct of a community of practice is to have relevance to the development of the RLP then the community of practice must make an impact outside the community itself; it must lead to sustained and long term developments and changes for both panel members and policy makers.

The work of the RLP and the chair and vice chair in particular has attracted a lot of interest but paradoxically this may hint at a potential difficulty with such a group. The emergence of the role of a panel as a ‘one stop shop’ for such conversations must be resisted. Such engagement has potential to seduce policy makers in adopting the position that learners have been consulted. Central to this position is that distributed leadership may apply across the many not just the few and that the RLP has boundaries that must be acknowledged and understood.

It is clear from the research findings that the dynamics surrounding the establishment and on going activity of the regional learner panel are highly complex and to some extent unresolved. Nevertheless, issues are emerging that have potential to be significant in helping to illuminate the role of such groups in contributing to learners as leaders.
**Acknowledgements**

The researchers want to thank the research participants for their time. They are particularly grateful to the members of the RLP who participated. The researchers hope that this report recognises the energy that they bring to the work of the RLP.

The researchers also appreciate the support of Professor David Collinson and Maureen Morrison of CEL at Lancaster University. The opportunity to undertake the research has enabled a considerable degree of reflection that has been profoundly helpful in informing further development of the panel. The support of Aqila Choudry, - Executive Director of People In Action in facilitating the research was most welcome.

**References**


Team Coaching for Learner Success
Jo Burbridge and Jayne Morgan, Lewisham College

Executive Summary
This report explores whether coaching techniques can improve learner success and retention rates. It examines the impact of solutions focused coaching in three key areas: team cohesiveness through peer coaching; team performance through coaching; and learner performance through tutorials. We also explore the impact that leadership through innovation had on both team leaders and members. The key question for the research was “can coaching techniques improve learner success and retention rates?” The project engaged course teams and learners from two curriculum areas with regular facilitation and support from existing internal coaches. All participants attended a two day training workshop on solutions focused coaching. The research found that the OSKAR model was seen as most beneficial as it provided the learners with an opportunity to resolve their own uncertainties. The teams reported that their learners showed improved confidence as the technique empowered them to find possible solutions for themselves. The use of the small steps approach in creating ILP targets was also considered effective with smarter targets being produced by the learners where this technique was used.

Introduction
In 2005/2006 Lewisham College committed to “Solutions Focused” coaching (SFC) as its management development approach. This initiative mobilised the agency of staff with the aim of improving workforce performance and leadership skills amongst middle managers. A review of this initiative has led to an appetite for the exploration of innovative coaching models such as peer and team coaching for learner success.

This project explores whether coaching techniques can improve learner success and retention rates. It gave us the opportunity to design and deliver a 3 way coaching model to maximise team cohesiveness, team performance and learner achievement. We were aware that some curriculum programmes had been challenged by learner behaviour and its impact on retention. With this in mind we used this research opportunity to challenge and change learner behaviour and the teams that support them.

The project engaged the course teams and learners in two curriculum areas with regular facilitation and support from a team of existing internal coaches. The curriculum cohorts selected have established learner data patterns for retention and success rates from 2006/2007 which will be used for comparison at the end of the project. During the six month period the curriculum teams have been trained in coaching techniques to support each other and their learners to achieve and perform.
The research set out to investigate how the use of SFC can have an impact in three key areas: team cohesiveness through peer coaching; team performance through team coaching by the team leaders; and learner performance through tutorials. Throughout this we also wanted to investigate the impact that leadership through innovation had on both the team leaders and team members.

Leadership and management are distinct concepts but the words are often used interchangeably. Whilst management is about controlling and problem solving, leadership should focus on motivating and enabling others to work towards new goals. While one considers what is probable, the other considers what is possible. Both are necessary, but whereas management is about coping with complexity, leadership is about coping with change.

This project aims to investigate the impact of coaching on leadership skills amongst middle managers and curriculum staff by looking at how the solutions focused coaching techniques can help participants provide encouragement and help when progress is tough, and recognition of success when it is achieved. They too will be supported by coaching, feedback and role-modelling.

The central philosophy of SFC is based around three underpinning principles and these formed a key part of the research and the findings:

1. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it;
2. Once you know what works, do more of it;
3. If it doesn’t work then don’t do it again, do something different.

The research was designed to answer the following questions:

- Can coaching techniques improve learner success and retention rates through curriculum teams?
- Can an innovative three way coaching model enable curriculum teams to maximise their own performance as individuals, their own performance as a team and that of their learners?
- Can coaching be enhanced through the virtual learning environment for both learners and staff?
- Can this model be transferable and scalable throughout the college and disseminated nationally?

**Research Framework**

Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) is based on a social constructionist philosophy which argues that the best learning environment is one where there is a vigorous and purposeful interaction between lecturers, learners and tasks, providing learners with an opportunity to create meaning due to the interaction with others. Social constructivism thus emphasizes the importance of culture and context in
understanding what is happening in society and the world, and constructing knowledge based on this understanding.

The title SFBT, and the specific steps involved in its practice, are attributed to husband and wife Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg and their team at the Brief Family Therapy Family Center in Milwaukee, USA. Their work in the early 1980s built on that of a number of other innovators, among them Milton Erickson, and the group at the Mental Research Institute at Palo Alto – Gregory Bateson, Don Jackson, Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland, Virginia Satir, Jay Haley, Richard Fisch, Janet Beavin Bavelas and others.

SFC focuses on what people want to achieve rather than on the problem or problems that made them seek help. As de Shazer (1991) observed,

"Problem talk creates problems, solutions talk creates solutions."

Thus SFC does not focus on the past, but instead, focuses on the present and the future. The coach uses subtle inquisitiveness to invite the coachee to describe their perfect vision and then work together to determine the steps that can be taken to achieve it, whether these are small increments or large changes. To support this, questions are asked about the coachee's story, skills and resources, and about exceptions to the problem, things that are currently working well. It is by bringing these small successes to the coachee's attention and helping them to repeat them that the coach is able to help the coachee move towards their perfect vision (see also Sallis and Herbert 2007).

The key differences between a Problem Focused and Solutions Focused approach are shown in the table below (Jackson & McKergow, 2002):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem Focus</th>
<th>Solutions Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What’s wrong</td>
<td>What’s wanted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What needs fixing</td>
<td>What’s working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame</td>
<td>Progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causes in the past</td>
<td>“Counters” in the past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The expert knows best</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deficits and weaknesses</td>
<td>Resources and strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>Simplicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Actions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whilst we are aware that a solutions focused approach is not always appropriate (sometimes there is a problem that just has to be dealt with), it is our belief that in our drive to empower learners and encourage success a solutions focus will be appropriate.

**Research Methods**

The principal research methodologies used were Action Research and Quantitative Analysis (Lewin 1946). Action research is an iterative inquiry process that enables practitioners to evaluate their own practice with a view to improving performance. To facilitate this, participants were asked to keep reflective diaries in order to highlight case work. There were also regular team review days and video diaries made to capture the learner voice before and after tutorials, and practitioner views pre and post team meetings.

This research methodology helped us to capture the learner voice and their experience of being coached as they had the opportunity to reflect on how they are achieving their targets. Similarly, tutors were asked to keep a weekly reflective diary on their coaching successes and managers had the opportunity to monitor the effectiveness of their teams through one-to-ones.

Quantitative research was used to support the project through the collection and analysis of empirical data. The curriculum cohorts selected established learner data patterns for retention and success rates from 2006/2007 and this data was used for comparison at the end of the project.

Participants in the project included eleven teaching staff and thirty-eight learners across two different curriculum areas who were supported by two internal coaches. Individual interviews were carried out with five of the staff members and eight of the learners. All staff participating in the project attended a 2 day workshop on SFC.

The first day of the workshop was for all participants and covered:

- **OSKAR – a solutions-focused coaching model and the principles underpinning it.**

- The principles underpinning solutions focused work and the differences between a problem focused and solutions focused approach.

- How solutions focused coaching can be applied with an opportunity to be coach and be coached on any issues.

Day 2 for team leaders and facilitators covered:

- An introduction to, and practice using solutions-focused team coaching tools and techniques including using an opportunity to use coaching techniques to create a project plan.
Day 3 for tutors covered:

- An introduction to, and practice using solutions-focused 1:1 coaching tools and coaching learners for success.

Participants were also invited to make a video diary recording their expectations from the training and the project as a whole, how they felt these expectations had been met, and how different they felt after they had completed the training programme.

**Research Findings**

Whilst we set out to answer four key questions as part of this research, in the short time available we have only really touched the surface of the first two questions that we posed ourselves.

- Can coaching techniques improve learner success and retention rates through curriculum teams?
- Can an innovative three way coaching model enable curriculum teams to maximise their own performance as individuals, their own performance as a team and that of their learners?
- Can coaching be enhanced through the virtual learning environment for both learners and staff?
- Can this model be transferable and scalable throughout the college and disseminated nationally?

The latter two questions were somewhat ambitious within the current time frame but are areas that we wish to develop further over the next academic year. It is too early to draw final conclusions as statistics for retention and achievement will not be available until the end of the academic year. However tutors are reporting positive indications that it is possible, through the use of coaching techniques, to mobilise and engage staff that for a long time have displayed a reticent attitude towards change.

We used the coaching training to develop the project plan which enabled team members to fully participate in the consultation process and led to an agreed project plan. There was also evidence of increased motivation amongst the team members as a result of this. Participants from both teams along with their mentors (existing internal coaches) took part in the training sessions which took place at the end of November 2007. The participants were asked to participate in a video diary session at the beginning and end of the training period and the overall feedback from the training was positive. Some of the comments are below:

**Participant expectations of the coaching training:**

“I don’t really know and I’m not sure what to expect. I’m not really clear about what the goals are but I am assuming that it will help inspire people to take a greater part in the work that we’re doing.”

(Programme Leader)
“I am hoping that by the end of the session I would have acquired skills that will enable me to work closely with my tutees.” (Lecturer)

“To try and improve my teaching strategies, to try and adapt to different learner needs, to try and see how best we can deliver business studies in a different fashion.” (Lecturer)

Participant comments after completing the training:

“I feel inspired myself now I am almost bursting with ideas and possibilities, it was fantastic.” (Programme Area Leader)

“This is about coaching. It’s about seeking solutions to problems whether they be individual learner problems whether they are education based, personal or pastoral.” (Lecturer)

“The flexibility of these techniques I think is what struck me, so that you can use it in different ways in different situations, and with different sorts of teams.” (Lecturer)

The team from the School of Business had been operating successfully for some time but had concerns about how their learners can gain in confidence and progress after completing their courses. They saw the opportunity of using coaching through tutorials and team coaching in the classroom as a way to improve this in the future. Their main aims were to raise the learner expectations and become more autonomous learners, focusing more on targeted career developments within a business context.

As a result of the training programme, the business team decided to take what they had learnt to their school and present it as part of the college learning days taking place in January 2008. Since the training took place the teams have reported that they are using a mixture of solutions focused (OSKAR and small steps) and motivational techniques both with staff and learners in the classroom and in tutorials.

The business team reported that they found it most useful with learners and although using it in small ways with staff, as a well structured team, they felt it would be more useful with new staff (particularly visiting tutors). They found the OSKAR model most beneficial as it provided the learners with an opportunity to resolve their own uncertainties. They felt that their learners were gaining in confidence as this technique empowered them to find possible solutions for themselves.

In one example where a learner was identified by the personal tutor as being at risk of not completing the course the OSKAR technique was used as part of the tutorial process. The learner had not made the connection between poor attendance and the likelihood of not completing the course and gaining his desired qualification. By using the OSKAR model the learner was able to see the bigger picture, to understand that poor attendance was putting his qualification at risk. As a result, the learner is now demonstrating improved attendance and a better social attitude towards peers, tutors and parents.
The second team from the Skills Academy have all been working at the college for some time but have only recently been brought together as team under a manager who is fairly new to the organisation. There are 7 members within the team, 4 longstanding members of staff and 3 relatively new to the organisation. All have traditionally taught at A level but have now had their workload changed dramatically so that they are working with some of the most disaffected young people, meaning therefore, that they are having to work in a very different way. It is the focus on Key Skills that is bringing the team together and its assessment strategy is adding to their pressures. They saw this as an opportunity to get closer as a team and use the coaching skills they are learning to help their learners improve their performance. Their main aim was to see a change in behaviour with their learners.

Since the training took place, the Skills Academy have reported that they have seen a more open approach amongst the team members and the coaching training has helped them to talk and listen more to each other. They want to extend some of the principles into a cross college discussion on the Key Skills agenda. Coaching has been openly used in team meetings. In one example the team leader had two specific purposes, to test the use of the solutions focused techniques and to look at progress in the area of Key Skills. He discussed his strategy with his internal coach and planned to start the meeting with everyone talking about a “Sparkling Moment”.

The room had been arranged in a specific way and although the body language at the start suggested some cynicism or even reticence, this strategy worked really well with everyone participating. This was followed by a general discussion reinforcing the 3 underlying principles. The idea of solutions focused coaching was not new and many felt that they were already using a lot of the techniques. This fits with the principle “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” but also led to further discussion around analysing what they were doing and focussing on the things that worked (“Once you know what works, do more of it”).

They have also started to work collaboratively on setting assignments and delivering some classes. The team has an inherent concern about rejection and it is hoped that the use of the OSKAR techniques that they are now using will help them to overcome this. The internal coach also worked with cross college groups to try to improve smart targets being set in Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) and demonstrated how the use of solutions focused coaching, particularly the use of the small steps technique could help learners to set their own targets more effectively.

This programme was considered successful on three levels, firstly the internal coach worked with the tutors, putting them in groups and giving them the opportunity to work together to find out how learners behaved in different classes. They looked at the learner targets and discussed them using the small steps approach.

In one example it was clear that in literacy the learner needed to improve his proof reading skills but in discussion it was felt that this solution would be too daunting for the particular learner. So it was decided that it needed to be broken down into a series of small incremental steps that would be achievable by the learner by targeting one aspect (e.g. spelling) first. The tutors were then able to work together so that all
tutors for a learner shared information and coached each other to work with the learner in a cohesive way, to decide the goal and then develop the small steps. On the final level the tutors worked with the learners encouraging them to come up with the targets for themselves.

The internal coach was encouraged that this technique was being used effectively when the ILPs were submitted demonstrating smarter targets that were clearly personalised by the learner. The tutors also appreciated this method of setting ILP targets as the learners were empowered to find the solutions themselves and therefore felt greater motivation to achieve them.

**Conclusions**

Lewisham College are aware that some curriculum areas are challenged by learner behaviour and its impact on retention and set out to investigate how the use of a three way coaching model can challenge and change the learner experience. The coaching was solutions focused, using the OSKAR model and is being used across two curriculum teams (one established, one fairly new) within the college. Overall it is too soon to see the full impact of the techniques employed on retention and achievement. Where the small steps approach has been used the signs are encouraging that they empower the learners to take more control over their learning. However, the sample used was relatively small and the feedback at this stage is anecdotal.

The use of the small steps approach in ILPs appears to be most effective with smarter targets being produced where this technique has been used. However, at the time of writing, these have only been used in recent tutorials and the achievement of the targets has not been evidenced.

The team from the School of Business is functioning well. They have worked together for some time but have concerns about how their learners can gain in confidence and progress after completing their courses. Their main aims were to raise learner expectations enabling them to become more autonomous, focusing on targeted career developments within a business context. The results reported by the team are encouraging and some improved learner motivation and focus on what they want to achieve has been noted. It is envisaged that this will be seen at the end of the academic year in terms of the retention and achievement data and also the progression routes decided upon by the learners.

Members of the team from the Skills Academy have been working at the College for some time but have only recently been brought together as a team under a manager who is fairly new to the organisation. They are working with some of the most disaffected young people and the focus on Key Skills that is bringing the team together and its assessment strategy is adding to their pressures. Their main aims were to get closer as a team and to use their coaching skills to help their learners improve their performance and to see a change in behaviour with their learners.
The use of the coaching model has shown some improvement in the team dynamics and they have made extensive use of the coaching models amongst themselves and with their learners. They appear to have bought into the process and hopefully the results of their efforts will be seen in retention and achievement figures at the end of the academic year.

The team members all attended a 2 day training session on solutions focused coaching with a particular focus on the OSKAR model. One of the training workshops facilitated using team coaching techniques to develop a project plan which evidenced increased motivation on the part of the team members. The teams have now been mobilised, ground rules have been established and the objectives of the project have been clearly communicated. So far, we are seeing positive indications that it is possible, through the use of these coaching techniques, to mobilise and engage staff that for a long time have displayed a reticent attitude towards change.

The coaching techniques learnt during the training workshops are now being disseminated to other members of the schools participating and use made of the new skills in team meetings. The next phase of the project will be to extend this use to the classroom and in 1:1 learner tutorials. Whilst encouraged by the results so far, we acknowledge that it will take time for the full effect of the coaching techniques to be known and that in order to make it sustainable in the future continued support and training is essential in motivating staff to be innovative leaders.

The implied success of the use of the small steps approach in the ILP process suggests that this should be rolled out to a wider group of teaching staff over the coming academic year. This will give us more data to review and allow us to make a more balanced decision on the impact of such an initiative. To continually motivate and encourage staff, it is also suggested that further training and particularly internal collaboration is put into place.

References


The Leadership Implications for FE Provision of Plans to Raise the Participation Age to 18

Darren Moore, North Devon College

Executive Summary

The government intends to raise the age young people must participate in education or training to 18 by 2015. A growing body of new literature points towards concerns that need addressing in order to realise this significant change to the educational system and UK employment. This research adds to the debate by considering the leadership implications of raising the participation age (RPA), with an emphasis on the change in FE, which is expected to play a significant part in engaging young people to 18. The report presents two cases of young people who have not stayed in education or training post-16 and asks how this might be prevented in future. Practitioners are also interviewed to provide opinion from the front line, as well as their perceived implications. The cases highlight issues that need addressing and the practitioner responses show that, while the idea of RPA is generally supported, those who work with young people anticipate many issues that FE leaders will have to overcome for this legislation to be a success.

Introduction

This report considers the leadership implications of raising the participation age to 18 (RPA). The research investigates what the ramifications will be if all young people stay in education or training in England and Wales until eighteen years of age and in particular considers the affect this might have on provision for FE.

With challenging targets for student recruitment this academic year, North Devon College has already focused on both those young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) and in jobs without training in order to try and engage these individuals. However, by 2015 these subgroups ought not to exist (DfCSF, 2007), therefore such FE Colleges would need to prevent young people from leaving education or training.

The Green Paper, ‘Raising Expectations’ (DfCSF, 2007) sets out proposals that require all young people to remain in education or training until their 18th birthday. While historically there has been a belief that young people should be in some form of recognised learning until they are 18, RPA is seen as beneficial and indeed necessary given the sharp decline in unskilled jobs in the UK (House of Commons, 2008). The Government proposes a change in the statutory leaving age to 17 in 2013 and then to 18 in 2015. This means that changes would first apply to children who start secondary school in 2008 (DfCSF, 2007). In order to achieve this ambitious reform
the Government highlights a need to find a suitable route for every young person, indicating that changes to provision will be expected. Advice guidance and support for young people will be necessary to underpin the change and is a prerequisite for the success of such a change. Finally, the Government sees that employers and local authorities will play an important part in helping to enforce the change (DfCSF, 2007).

Under plans to raise the participation age, FE Colleges will be expected to recruit those young people who at the current time find themselves out of education or training. This is particularly the case for those who offer vocational education and training as well as training designed to be offered to employees through their employers. Whether these young people can be persuaded to participate in another two years of learning at 16 will be a challenge for leaders at FE Colleges.

There is considerable doubt as to whether the penalties would be enforceable or even appropriate, therefore providers will need to be proactive in attracting young people into education or training, rather than rely on financial penalties for young people or their parents or incentives to encourage participation. Only by considering the implications of these changes and adjusting for them now can this potential legislation be a success if and when it becomes policy. There is also uncertainty about what affect this will have on FE in terms of increased student numbers.

This report aims to reflect on the experiences of young people, particularly those who have not remained in education and training until eighteen years of age and consider the opinions of practitioners whose work would be directly affected by this change in legislation. The research therefore focuses on the following questions:

- How would raising the age of leaving education or training to 18 affect FE provision?
- What are the leadership implications for FE provision of raising the participation age?
- How must young people prepare for this change in legislation?
- What back up plans should be put in place for when young people’s plans change?
- What support do schools and colleges require in order to cope with this legislation?

**Research Framework**

An Education and Skills Bill is currently being passed through the House of Commons which introduces a requirement to remain in education or training beyond the current statutory leaving age, and implements the recommendations of the Leitch Review on adult skills (Leitch, 2007). Key areas of the bill set out the raising of the age young people stay in education or training to 18, with a duty on young people to participate and on parents to assist their children to participate. It sets out duties on employers to release young people for the equivalent of one day a week to undertake
training elsewhere (where the employer does not provide their own training). The bill introduces a duty on local authorities to ensure that young people participate and to provide the support service currently known as Connexions. It also requires local authorities to assess the education and training needs of young people aged 16-19 with special educational needs (House of Commons, 2008).

Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, has stressed that enforcement will most likely be applied to ensure all children stay in education or training until they reach 18 in the future. The number of low-skill jobs available to young people is expected to fall dramatically from about 3 million now to just 600,000 by 2020. Furthermore, over 200,000 16-18 year olds have dropped out of education and are not in work or any form of training (Mulholland, 2007).

Balls has highlighted the need for a culture change in young people, their parents and the education and employment system (Mulholland, 2007). Young people who continue in education or training for longer earn more, and are less likely to be involved in anti-social behaviour. Therefore those who currently drop out have the most to gain from continuing to learn and gain skills.

Former Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Alan Johnson presented research which suggested that 9 out of 10 people support the idea of education or training until the age of 18 (Homeyard, 2007). According to the survey of 859 adults in England and Wales, three quarters of people strongly agree with the proposal, although less young adults agreed with it. Of the respondents, 81% agreed overall that remaining in education or work-based training until the age of 18 will increase a person's prosperity later in life. Of the parents and grandparents asked, 95% said they would like their children or grandchildren to stay in education or work-based training until the age of 18. While almost all respondents (90%) agreed that it is a good idea for teenagers to remain in education or a form of work-based training (such as an apprenticeship) up to the age of 18, two thirds (66%) agree that this should be made a legal requirement. This indicates wide support for RPA.

However, research conducted by the Learning and Skills Network (LSN) gives a different picture. Still their public opinion survey showed a convincing 71% of parents agreed with the idea. However, when they asked teenagers, only a slim majority (51%) were in favour. The results hint at the hurdles ahead (Stone, 2007). Most parents in the poll (59%) don’t think the proposals are a restriction on personal freedom, but teenagers (71%) think it should be their decision. However, of the parents who don’t agree with the overall proposal, an overwhelming 93% think teenagers have a right to choose. Of the parents asked in LNS’s poll, 80% said that teenagers who are not motivated to learn will not comply (Stone, 2007).

What little research has been conducted on people’s attitude towards the reform, shows a mixed reception. We might predict that parents will be supportive of the idea and that young people will see that they ought to have a choice, hence this research makes an objective analysis of young people’s experiences and questions practitioners who will be affected by these changes. However, it is not just young people themselves who have expressed opposition to the change. John Stone, Chief
Executive of the Learning and Skills Network, believes that the proposal relies on a long list of initiatives that are in their infancy. He believes it would be sensible to wait for initiatives, like specialised vocational diplomas and skills brokerage, to prove themselves (Stone, 2007).

Forcing teenagers to remain in education until 18 risks mass truancy according to Professional Association of Teachers (PAT) Chairman Geraldine Everett. The PAT believes the move must be handled sensitively, otherwise it could criminalise thousands of youngsters.

Fletcher, Corney and Stanton (2007) point to a range of issues that must be addressed. Firstly, Level 2 has been cited as the Qualification Level needed for employment and currently many 17 year olds seek work after completing a year long Level 2 vocational course. Working with disaffected groups produces lower success rates for providers and that may influence provision where success rates are currently an important measure to providers. Many skilled young people may genuinely want to work full-time before they are 18, however, it is not known if time will be available for them to find employment or they are likely to be forced into FE. Buck (2007) believes that for the law to have any credibility with young people they need to see how it will benefit them in real ways. Buck (2007) also predicts that the ethos of Sixth forms and FE Colleges may change as they try and absorb young people who are forced to attend.

The University and College Union have concerns about the ability of FE to soak up reluctant YP without damaging the learning experience of the rest (Hook, 2007). On the other hand Hook (2007) reports that the Association of College Management believes the reform will work as long as colleges can offer a suitably appetising menu of courses.

One of the most widely criticised areas of the proposal is the idea of criminalising young people who do not participate to 18. Former Education Secretary, Alan Johnson, believes we can follow the successes of other countries where young people participate to 18. For example, in Canada one major step has been to introduce legislation that those under 18 cannot apply for a driving licence or take a driving test unless they are at school or in training (BBC News, 2006). However, opposition parties tend to believe that compulsion is not the answer. For instance David Laws, the Liberal Democrat’s Children, Schools and Families spokesman has said that criminalising young people who do not participate would be wrong (Mulholland, 2007).

There exists a range of comments, concerns and suggestions from many interested parties that will need at some stage to be addressed, if raising the participation age to 18 is to work. This research considers the implications particularly for FE provision by charting the experience of young people who have not participated in education or training for a period of time post-16 and questions a range of practitioners who currently work in FE or another setting that works with 16-18 year olds.
Research Methods

Interpretivism provides a range of methods that can be used (e.g. grounded theory, observation, ethnography, hermeneutics (Cohen et al, 2000), but the one most suited to the aims of the proposed research are case study methods. This method facilitates an insight into how young people currently experience the transition at 16, with a particular emphasis on why their original plans may not have been realised and they find themselves out of education and training.

Participants were sought from a sample of ten young people who were interviewed in Year 11 before they left school about their intended post-16 destinations. While all will be re-interviewed, the nature of this research meant that the research has naturally focussed on two participants who, although intending to go into FE at North Devon College, are currently out of education or training.

These interviews were supplemented with structured interviews with practitioners to give opinion on how the planned changes would affect the education system with a particular focus on FE provision. These practitioners include FE Management, FE tutors, Vocational course tutors, Apprenticeship Assessors, Employers, Connexions Workers, 14-19 Education Coordinators, Engagement Mentors etc. Practitioners were asked two questions after being given a quick explanation of the Government’s plans to raise the participation age and then asked:

1. What is your opinion of these proposals and why?
2. What might the impact of RPA be for someone in your current job role?

Information about the respondent’s job roles were also recorded. It was decided to ask these two questions as they fit with the aims of the research and allowed conclusions to be drawn about the implications for leadership in FE. The interviews were kept short in order to allow busy practitioners to participate and to allow a full analysis of many responses under time constraints. 15 interviews were completed with practitioners in time for analysis. The research may have benefitted from more interviews and certainly more from outside FE, however it was more difficult arranging interviews with those beyond the immediate research setting. Further time would have allowed more interviews to be conducted, but would have lengthened analysis. Ethical considerations meant that interviewees remained anonymous. Pseudonyms are used for the young people and job roles are only given for the practitioners. For post-16 interviews with young people, parental consent was not needed. However, because these interviews considered personal experiences of participants, confidentiality has been maintained.
Research Findings

The two interviews conducted give situations that would need to be managed if the participation age is raised, two young people intended going into Further Education after they left school, but neither are currently in education or training. While both are biding their time before they start their next choice, they would presumably be outlaws as soon as 2013, when seventeen year olds must be in education or training.

Donny

Donny (pseudonym) was already out of full-time education pre-16, due to behavioural problems and disaffection in Year 9 and Year 10. He was placed on a school support programme, where he worked on a couple of GCSEs as part of the programme and spent the rest of the time working on behavioural management, work experience and citizenship type work,

“It’s just like to give people a helping hand in life like, to boost them up.”

In Year 11, Donny appeared to be in a secure position with a meeting arranged over the summer with a building firm willing to offer him an apprenticeship,

“Yeah, I’ve got a meeting after the holidays, to see like with the boss that I’ve been working with, see if he’s gonna take me on.”

Over the summer, Donny changed his mind. However, his decision appears well reasoned; Donny preferred general labouring work in which he was skilled, to the more restricted bricklaying trade,

“The building side of it, I loved it like.”

He also spoke with the previous bricklaying apprentice at the firm,

“The last apprenticeship they had was a brickie and he’s only a couple of years older than me and he did like a bit of brickie work every month or something like that, but they were using him as a labourer. So I thought “ah there’s no point, I’d rather be on more money, doing what I wanna do than less money doing what I don’t wanna do.”

Donny thought that College would be like school,

“I just don’t wanna go cos it’ll just be like school I reckon, I’ll end up getting kicked out.”
Aside from thinking that his previous failings would be repeated, Donny was also in contact with friends who had gone into the army and appeared to be really enjoying themselves. As a former Army cadet, Donny revealed his interest in the army,

“It’s always been in the back of my mind, wanting to go in the army…but now I’m up for it, I want to do it.”

Donny hopes to join the army in January 2008, but has to complete a fitness diary due to a former injury in the meantime,

“So I’ve got to do a three month diary of all the exercise I do. And then I’ve got to go up to Barnstaple give them that and they send it away to the medicals and they say “ah look he’s fit enough” and then I can go up for selection.”

Donny finds himself out of education and training at 16, albeit temporarily, because he decided against FE and has faced a delay before army selection.

In early September, Donny was out of education and training so would not fit into future legislation, however, he was still working in labouring and gaining skills, without any accredited training though. From October, however, the building firm had to let him go.

“The building firm I was working for was like not doing very well, they’d like took some other people on that were like older than me and they had driving licences, so that means I got pushed out really.”

So Donny had moved into the NEET category although he is hoping to find more work before army selection in January.

There does not appear to be much that Donny can do to alleviate his situation. Given his past relationship with the learning sector, it is encouraging that he has chosen a path that should suit him well and is himself positive about joining the army.

“I really wanna go in … just being in all the action and that.”

The College was unaware of Donny’s change of heart,

“Well from the start of it I just didn’t go…I didn’t sort out my bus pass or nothing.”

As Donny’s case illustrates, young people can change their goals between the end of school and before beginning their post-16 choice (just a few months later). This raises the question, who is then responsible for someone like Donny staying in education or training until 18?
Jon

Jon was a relatively bright student but did not enjoy school and lacked confidence in the core subjects which had put him off A Levels at College.

“A Levels I didn’t even think about it cos I thought it was just Maths and English and that and I didn’t particularly want to do that cos I just wouldn’t really concentrate or anything.”

Like Donny he hoped to secure an apprenticeship after school. Jon received offers of apprenticeships but turned them all down as the ‘right one’ didn’t turn up. Unlike Donny, he did not want to do a Level 1 programme in bricklaying at College, as he thought it would be basic and he would not like the other students who were ‘a bit thick’. He sought advice when he got his GCSE results and decided to start a National Diploma in Sport at North Devon College, which fitted with his interests,

“I really enjoy sports and am pretty good at sports, so I thought I’d do a sports course.”

However, a month and a half into this course at College Jon had withdrawn and was out of education and training himself. Part of his justification for leaving the course was that he does not see that many opportunities available from completing a sports qualification and believes he would have closed off too many doors.

“I was thinking actually I don’t want to do sports, like go down the road of sports after two years all my options is after I’ve got like that diploma is it has to be with sports to do.”

Jon was constrained in his thinking about his future at school since he believed that he would not achieve the grades required to get onto A Levels or a Level 3 course and believed that A Levels only included Science and Maths type subjects – the lessons he least enjoyed in school.

“I didn’t actually know that in A Levels its not just all about English, Maths and Science.”

Jon’s case illustrates that not all young people have clear future goals in mind or have back-up plans in case their initial post-16 plan does not come to fruition.

Jon is now in an awkward situation, although he still maintains a positive outlook on his situation and post-16 experience to date,
Jon withdrew from his sports course at a time too late to transfer to A Levels. After seeking assistance from Connexions, he knows which A Level subjects he would prefer to study and wishes he could have applied for them instead of the sports course, although he insists by the fact that he did not expect to achieve the grades to even contemplate A Levels.

“For level three, you need five Cs or over, so I didn’t want to like go for that so if I didn’t get the Cs then I wouldn’t have made it.”

Jon’s experience indicates that institutions should not assume that all students take in the information given to them. By his own admittance, Jon switched off to information about A Levels because of a pre-conceived idea that A Levels involved Maths and Science subjects only. The absence of a back-up plan (if his grades were worse or better than expected) made him vulnerable to being out of education and training at 16.

“The position I’m in at the moment obviously isn’t the best to be in so I would probably say for like other students and that, before they go up to College, they should definitely have a back up plan and they should find a lot more out about College and what they can do.”

These two cases suggest that there are the few who change their mind for sometimes legitimate reasons about their post-16 plans. In both these cases, the young people appear to have benefitted from having the time to consider their future and it makes sense for them to seek a job without training in order to make some money before they embark on their newly chosen respective pathways. Would they be able to do this if this was 2013 rather than 2007?

Practitioner perspectives

Practitioner responses to questions about their opinion of the proposal to raise the participation age and the perceived impact to their role are analysed thematically. The 15 responses were coded and themes that emerged in at least three responses are presented below for each question. The themes presented first were more frequently occurring across participants.

A good idea

Even for those respondents who had some reservations about the proposal, it was often considered that,

“The idea that all young people should be in training or education up to 18 is a good one.” (Head of Innovation and External Funding, FE College)

So as for parents and general members of the public (Homeyard, 2007; Stone, 2007), practitioners ‘agree with the thrust’ (Vice Principal, FE College) of the proposal. Many practitioners see it as beneficial for young people,
"I think it will be a good opportunity for people to gain further knowledge, skills and life experience prior to employment." (Care NVQ Assessor)

**Need to address NEETs**

Several practitioners recognised that the group of young people currently not in any education, employment or training at all, are the ones that will need addressing and will be more difficult to encourage to participate,

"The NEETs are a more interesting group, in the sense that the government hasn’t really figured out what the impact of trying to engage this group will be." (Vice Principal, FE College)

**Will be difficult and costly to implement**

While many practitioners agreed in principle with RPA, the most frequent drawback seen is that it will be both difficult and costly to implement,

"There is a huge amount of setup work required to get this right, in support and training for potential employers etc." (Student Support Manager, FE College)

"I think our [FE College’s] pitch will be quite simply if you want to maintain this group in learning of some sort there is an ancillary cost.” (Vice Principal, FE College)

**Employers will face the biggest change**

This research focuses on FE provision, since the young people interviewed were intending studying at North Devon College and the practitioners either work for the College or for organisations that work with the College (employers, Connexions etc). However, practitioners recognised that employers will face the biggest change,

"I think the main pressures will be in getting employers on board who will provide more than just a job without training.” (Connexions Team Leader)

“It would stimulate all small companies to look at the training requirements of their staff, because of the requirement to do this for all school leavers.” (Work Force Development Team Leader)

This may pose a problem as ‘not many jobs available offer training’ (Information, Advice and Guidance Team Leader, FE College). We do not know whether employers will review their training offer in line with the reform or be less likely to offer jobs to 16 year olds.
Working at 16 is not necessarily a bad thing

Given the above, it is important to recognise that working at 16, even without training, may not necessarily be negative. After all, some practitioners believe that ‘if a young person does work full-time, experience is just as important as accreditation’ (Engagement/student mentor, FE College). Some practitioners therefore believe that the proposals would not be positive if they preclude a sixteen year old from working at all. Likewise Fletcher et al (2007) point out that many seventeen year olds are ready for work having attained a Level 2 qualification, but again jobs without training will not be available.

Should not be enforced

Practitioners agreed with many writers on the subject (eg Mulholland, 2007) that the proposals are ‘a terrible idea if this involves threats and compulsion’ (Principal, FE College). The main reason given is that ‘forcing students to be in school or college rather than work would cause resentment’ (Information, Advice and Guidance Team Leader, FE College). Several practitioners commented on their experience with Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), which some argue draws reluctant learners into FE (ref). Practitioners would tend toward a position that ‘having to bribe [students] into education with EMA does not do the system any good’ (Work Based Learning Placement Officer & FE Lecturer). One practitioner commented,

“I have had a lecturer in the past who has told me that one of his students told him that he was only in the class to get his EMA, but that he wasn’t going to do any work.” (EMA Co-ordinator)

Works elsewhere

Several practitioners were more positive about the reform, mentioning that it works in Europe and in North America,

“I come from a culture where this is the norm, in North America you can leave school at 16 but they don’t because they know they can’t get a job.” (Vice Principal, FE College)

However, research has shown that there is little direct evidence of the impact on young people in countries where participation is to 18 (Spielhofer et al, 2007). Elsewhere this Vice Principal talked about the need to ‘break down culture over decades’ in order to make participation to 18, the norm, something the government recognises is needed (Mulholland, 2007). Perhaps as Stone (2007) suggests, 2015 is too soon to get 100% of young people participating to 18.
Allows Young People to acquire skills they may need or have missed

A few practitioners focused on the benefit of participation to 18, as it ‘will also help for them [school leavers] to be able to catch up on subjects such as Key Skills to help them in later life’ (Care NVQ Assessor). Apart from reinforcing skills that young adults should have, some felt that it was a positive move to ‘engage students at College who did not achieve at school and would historically have left to do low paid work, unskilled work or to receive out of work benefits’ (EMA Co-ordinator) without the skills that may be taught up to the age of 18.

Problems with young people who currently withdraw, on gap year etc

Donny’s plight raised several questions, such as whether young people will be able to join the army at 16. Since he has spent several months NEET, albeit with a destination on hold, we must wonder whether the reform will be flexible enough to allow for this type of situation, even if the army is seen as a suitable destination for a 16 year old. Practitioners gave other situations where young people are not participating, for example ‘legitimate gap year students’ (Student Support Manager, FE College).

Jon has had to wait this academic year before he can start again at College. A recommendation to occur alongside the reform is to have more course start dates (Mulholland, 2007), so someone in Jon’s situation does not have to wait a full year. However, there is still a question as to whether ‘students wishing to change/withdraw mid year’ (Information, Advice and Guidance Team Leader, FE College) will be able to do so.

Impact to practitioners

Increase in challenging students

Those practitioners in FE were most likely to say that an impact to them would be the increase in challenging students. While practitioners do not seem to assume that those who do not participate currently are necessarily challenging they comment that ‘if the young people do not want training they could adversely affect those that do’ (Head of Innovation and External Funding, FE College). There is also a belief that FE is positive because it is,

“For students who want to be here and forcing young people to continue would bring a disruptive element into colleges.” (Information, Advice and Guidance Team Leader, FE College)

Need to expand course offering with flexibility

In order to accommodate potentially challenging learners, practitioners often recognised that the current FE curriculum is not conducive to getting 100% participation as highlighted in the original Green Paper (DfCSF, 2007), particularly if FE is a last choice for young people who want to work but cannot find a job that comes with training.
“Schools/colleges will be in the position where they have to find or create more and more courses to engage those learners who normally would have left school and actually do not want to be there.” (EMA Co-ordinator)

It is recognised that not only does course offering need to appeal to young people, but flexibility is needed in the curriculum,

“We need to be more innovative in curriculum and engagement strategies and to have more flexible approaches to learning.” (Principal, FE College)

Perhaps flexibility will be more feasible as we move towards 2013, as,

‘The introduction of the Foundation Learning Tier there will mean more flexibility for learners to follow a personalised learning programme, so the one-size fits all approach should theoretically disappear.’ (Head of Department, FE College)

Support will be needed for students

Given that challenging students will attend FE, with its more appetising and flexible course offering, support will be needed to keep young people who have chosen to participate in education, or support their transition into work with training (DfCSF, 2007). This is cited as a significant challenge by experienced FE practitioners,

“Working with students who may not have opted for FE, but find themselves here either through financial or nothing else to do reasons, are hard work to support and keep on role.” (Student Support Manager, FE College)

“We will be faced with students that do not wish to be here so more support and better advice will need to be provided.” (Marketing and Communications Team Leader, FE College)

Increase in FE student numbers

Put simply the proposals ‘would mean more students’ (EMA Co-ordinator) for FE Colleges. This has been predicted by many (e.g. Buck, 2007), but is a significant effect for North Devon College in particular. In 2011 its new purpose built campus will open and for the first time in over five years all courses will be offered from one site. If there is a dramatic increase in student numbers in 2013 and then again in 2015, a strain may be placed on the College’s new facilities.

More apprenticeships

Practitioners predict that the government promise of more apprenticeships will be an affect of raising the participation age (Stewart & Marley, 2007). However, Fletcher, Corney and Stanton (2007) note that currently there are more students seeking apprenticeships than places available, if more students are likely to be seeking apprenticeships, employers will need encouraging to offer them.
Qualifications do not guarantee jobs

Several practitioners considered the effects of the proposed change,

“There is a danger that if lots of courses are offered for vocational areas when learners leave there will not be the places in the local labour market for them to use what they have learned, giving us lots of young people in their early 20s with vocational full time education between 16 and 20 but no jobs to use them in.” (Connexions Team Leader)

This practitioner spoke about the ‘local labour market’ and the lack of current opportunities for young people. There will be problems if young people do participate and there are not jobs available at their 18th birthday. Will there also be a difference between the vocational areas that young people will wish to study and employment that is available to them after their studies are completed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research has considered plans to raise the participation age in England and Wales to 18 years of age. In order to investigate this, two cases were presented of young people who have found themselves not in education, employment or training post-16, to show the kind of situations that must be avoided for this legislation to work. Practitioners were also consulted to ascertain the affects they perceived, this allows conclusions to be drawn about the leadership implications of raising the participation age.

One way that previous research and practitioners themselves predict that FE provision will be affected is by a rise in the number of challenging or reluctant students. This poses a challenge for FE leaders in terms of curriculum offering and support that is needed to accommodate these learners. FE provision is also predicted to be affected by an increase in student numbers and in particular apprenticeships. Leaders in particular FE colleges will need to address this increase, and the implications for North Devon College at its new campus will need to be planned for.

Young people must prepare for this change in legislation by carefully choosing their post-16 options and considering back-up plans. The cases of Donny and Jon show that young people themselves cannot be relied on to make the correct choices for them, so will need support from schools and post-16 destinations to avoid becoming NEET. FE leaders must be proactive in developing provision that increases transferable skills and investigates the individual options of young people, to cater for those without a back-up plan who find themselves not participating.

The cases of Donny and Jon pose questions that must be considered ahead of 2015. Firstly who will be responsible for ‘no shows’, those young people who leave school but then do not start their post-16 destination? Also will the army be an appropriate post-16 destination? Jon shows that schools cannot provide support only for what a student says they wish to do as young people often do not have clear
goals for their post-16 careers (Ball et al, 1999). As Jon withdrew from a college course and is unable to start a new programme until September 2008, here is clear support that more start dates are needed as students will always withdraw for one reason or another.

Schools and colleges will require support in order to play their part in raising the participation age successfully. If local authorities are responsible for ensuring participation and employers are suspected to be greatly effected due to an increase in apprentices and having to provide training or training release for all young workers, then the Government will need to work with FE leaders to stimulate provision for young people who cannot work or train with employers that makes sense to FE providers.

Leaders need to learn from wherever participation to 18 works, especially as there is reluctance amongst practitioners and the Government to enforce the changes. A pressing concern is that suitable job opportunities exist post-18 where young people can apply their skills. Young people will certainly remain unconvinced by this change in legislation if 18 year olds cannot apply the skills that they have been encouraged to develop beyond their school career.

The Government promises that all young people can fulfill their own potential, tackle the blight of deprivation, inequality and poverty, and provide employers with the sort of skilled workforce that will ensure they are able to compete in an ever more competitive global market. This research report adds to other literature that suggests there is a long way to travel before these promises can become a reality. Since these changes will first affect secondary school starters in 2008, the clock is already ticking.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Donny and Jon who gave up their free time to tell me about their post-16 lives. Likewise I am glad that so many of my colleagues and staff from partner organisations were so willing to give their opinions. Finally, my thanks to Jane Beer who provided assistance in gathering relevant literature and analysing practitioner responses.

References


Buck, A. (2007) Teenagers should learn to 18 – just don’t force them to do it. *The Times*, 9th November.


Fletcher, M., Corney, M. & Stanton, G. (2007) *Raising the Leaving Age to 18: Symbol or substance*. Reading: CfBT Education Trust.


Further Information and Contact Details

Research and development are central to CEL’s organisational mission and we seek to encourage mutually-beneficial interrelations between theory, development, policy and practice. 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. A particularly distinctive feature of the CEL practitioner programme is that it enables staff working in the sector to participate in the setting of the research agendas, to define highly relevant issues for leadership and undertake to investigate and research these key themes.

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:

Professor David Collinson
National Research Director
Centre for Excellence in Leadership
Lancaster University Management School
CEL Research Office, Room B59
Lancaster
LA1 4YX
Tel: 01524 594364
Email: d.collinson@lancaster.ac.uk

Further information is also available at:
http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk
http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/cel/
List of CEL Practitioner Research Volumes

Since the practitioner scheme began in October 2004, over 100 projects have been funded, from which the volumes listed below have been published:

- **Volume 1** - Researching Leadership in the Learning and Skills Sector: By the Sector, On the Sector, For the Sector (2005-06)
- **Volume 2** - Developing Middle Leaders (2006-07)
- **Volume 3** - Leading Quality Improvement (2006-07)
- **Volume 4** - Leadership and the Learner Voice (2006-07)
- **Volume 5** - Collaborative Leadership (2006-07)
- **Volume 6** - Researching Disabilities (2007-08)
- **Volume 7** - Leading Employer Engagement (2007-08)
- **Volume 8** - Distributed and Shared Leadership (2007-08)
- **Volume 9** - Leadership Development and Succession (2007-08)
- **Volume 11** - Personalising Learner Voice (2007-08)
“The Government is pursuing personalised education. Learner voice is a fundamental aspect of personalisation and perhaps the most important ‘gateway’ for change and improvement.”
(Futurelab 2006)