
The future role of the further education college sector

Response to Sir Andrew Foster's review, March 2005

1. What are the key issues which the review should examine in relation to the role, purpose and mission of the further education college sector and colleges' relationships with other education and skills organisations?

It is important that the review provides greater overall clarity with regard to the position of and contribution to whole-system change that the further education college sector can make, as well as meeting the ongoing needs of its traditional base of adult vocational education.

The role should cover working as part of a wider local system with schools in dealing with student disengagement and disaffection through its capacity to deliver curriculum diversity, while bolstering the alternative basic post-16 provision for many learners. The arguments for this approach are well established, and practice in some areas is very good, but what is lacking is a consistent national framework and especially one which assists with the practicalities of provider collaboration.

This will involve dealing with management issues such as:

- Access – given variations in local transport and availability of provision
- Accountability, where delivery is shared, including details of associated inspection frameworks
- Potential industrial relations tensions arising out of shared delivery, given lecturers' and teachers' different terms and conditions of employment
- Better managed progression to higher education is another key issue, with the nature of relationships between institutions an important factor to address.

2. What are the strengths of the further education college sector – locally and nationally?

Its key strengths are in providing a diverse range of vocational provision, with specialist facilities, and in being able and willing to counter youth disengagement and disaffection.

Local strengths inevitably vary, but the further education college sector is most effective when working closely with other sectors.

3. What are the challenges facing the further education college sector over the next five years and beyond?

Basic skills enhancement and implementing 14–19 curriculum reforms are the key challenges for staff who, in turn, require a significant investment in their continuing professional development to meet the future needs of the sector.

The availability of suitably qualified teaching staff to deliver new programmes is an important issue. There is already a shortage of trainers of basic skills tutors and a lack of clarity about how 14–19 reform is to be managed within initial and continuing teacher training programmes for all sectors, including further education.

4. What changes do you think should be made to the further education college sector (and the context in which they operate) in the medium term (5–10 years) and longer term?

Purpose/mission

Moving closer to other providers – schools, sixth form colleges and higher education – within an appropriate framework encouraging effective collaboration. Greater institutional coherence is vital to whole-system development, although this is an issue for all providers, and not just further education colleges.

Culture/ethos

Some further education colleges still offer unwelcoming environments, while others have become far more welcoming. The learning environment and public perception are vital factors.

Image and reputation

A similar message pertains with regard to the culture and ethos of colleges.

Governance and accountability

The Association would like to see stronger and appropriate linkages to local authorities, both in terms of governance and reporting further education colleges' incorporated status should not undermine effective strong local accountability.

Leadership and management (local and national)

There appears to be potential for wider linkages across all education and training leadership and management which could work to the benefit of all. Perhaps further education leadership and management support has been particularly insular, in some respects.

Engagement with employers/economic role

Strategies to achieve greater understanding of basic skills needs are required.

Social and local community role

The facilities and location of further education colleges often make them useful places for future provision akin to full-service extended schools. The concept of extended colleges therefore needs to be developed.

5. Are there any models of good practice/excellence which you would like to draw to the review's attention?

Good practice exists in many parts of the country, in the form of the further education college sector working effectively with other sectors of education. These need to be 'captured' and general lessons learned in terms of critical success factors.

6. Anything else you want to add?

The financial costs of implementing review outcomes and dealing with the associated practicalities need to be identified and addressed within a government strategy apparent at an early stage.