Reimagining Leadership of FE:
15 Steps to Heaven

Report from the Leadership Working Group
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Abstract:
The Leadership Working Group was tasked with reimagining how FE leaders can facilitate the prioritisation of teaching, learning and assessment (TLA). We explored what leaders would actually do if they were to put TLA ahead of all other demands on their time. Accepting that real change comes about incrementally, the group identified 15 specific actions which fell into three broad categories: developing new routines and working habits; structural changes at an organisational level; and investment that embeds teaching and learning as a priority. This article elaborates these 15 actions, concluding with a call for further education providers individually and collectively to lead government thinking on post-16 TLA.

Introduction
Peter Drucker famously said ‘Only three things occur naturally in organisations: friction, confusion and underperformance. Everything else requires leadership’. That means leaders inevitably have a heavy and diverse to-do list. It also means large amounts of time must be given over to instilling harmony and clarity. Given this how can leaders genuinely make teaching and learning their first priority every day? This was the challenge considered by one of the Reimagining Further Education working groups.

The group itself was diverse with members working in universities, colleges and private training providers; most were executive leaders and managers but others were involved in governance of further education organisations or supplied services to them.

Initially the group considered models of leadership that might facilitate the prioritisation of teaching and learning but swiftly concluded the key was first identifying the ‘what’ rather than the ‘how’. What would leaders actually do if they were to put teaching and learning ahead of all other demands on their time?

Reflections on available research suggested that, if we are serious about making real and long-lasting change, we should accept change will be incremental, slow and insecure. The actions we
considered were therefore rarely aimed at sudden transformation but were long term and regular, helping reinforce and secure that new focus.

In considering ways leaders could make teaching and learning a visible priority the group identified 15 specific actions that could be taken by any institution.

The actions/activities fell into three broad categories:

- Developing new routines and working habits
- Structural changes at an organisational level
- Investment that embeds teaching and learning as a priority

**Developing new routines and working habits**

We considered how an organisation that put teaching and learning first might look like from the outside. Overall you would be likely to see teaching and learning reflected in almost every operation, every meeting, almost every interaction. That focus would be evident at all times, hard-wired into the institution’s daily life.

When we began to consider in more detail how that would present itself, we agreed nine actions:

**Action 1: Ensure there is a broad definition of teaching, learning and assessment (TLA)**

If the definition of TLA is too narrow, focused perhaps only on what is often defined as the ‘front line,’ it excludes too many, even the majority, of staff in an institution. This makes it difficult to create a sense of common purpose and a united front. The definition needs to be broad enough to encompass aspects such as mentoring by senior staff or the development of learning spaces. Once there is a shared understanding it will make it easier to identify activity related to TLA and enable everyone in the institution to test whether they are putting TLA first.

**Action 2: Principal and senior team actively lead on TLA**

As colleges in particular become bigger, the most senior staff can become distant within an organisation. The aim of making TLA the first priority will be undermined if leaders are not seen to be actively involved. The group felt this action was best achieved by senior leaders including the principal attending key meetings around TLA. The group discussed whether this could be damaging and seen as micro-management or a lack of trust but concluded this risk could be eliminated if meetings were approached in the right way. For example, the principal need not chair such meetings or could make clear it was the advice and guidance of meeting members that was being sought. Overall, the group’s experience suggested that visible championing of TLA matters would send a very strong signal to staff.

**Action 3: Encourage critical and dissenting voices**

A truly TLA-focused organisation would be constantly questioning itself and be full of curiosity. Leaders need to find ways to show different opinions can be expressed and debated. The group discussed ways this could be achieved such as meetings where senior leaders simply ask for
advice, allowing questions at staff meetings or explicitly asking for alternative views on policies being developed (testing ideas).

**Action 4: Encourage experimentation and research**

The success of the Reimagining FE Conference clearly showed the benefit of allowing staff to conduct their own research and share their work with others across the sector. The benefit of encouraging experimentation in a reasonably formal manner is that it gives permission to fail because it helps the organisation improve and learn from the experiments. The group also suggested that by making research practice more visible and formalised it would prevent people simply doing their own thing without having to evidence its effectiveness.

**Action 5: Ensure staff have sufficient time to reflect on their practice**

Experimentation requires staff to have time to reflect on what works and what doesn’t. In practice almost all teaching is an experiment, trying approaches out, and if we want to see improvement we need everyone to review and reflect. The group did not see this as a plea for less direct contact with students but a determination to reduce less important distractions. Leaders are well placed, perhaps best placed, to stop unnecessary ‘time-stealing’ activity by actively reiterating the key priorities and monitoring requests made by managers of teaching staff. Reflection time could even be timetabled.

**Action 6: Use data to provoke further questions (rather than as a weapon)**

The use of data by leaders was seen as a crucial element in demonstrating that TLA mattered. Too often data was seen to be used to criticise or praise staff. A truly TLA-focused organisation would use data to drive better conversations and deeper thinking. It was considered especially important to try to relate different data to reveal new insights or generate new hypotheses – ‘I wonder if?’

**Action 7: Check that teaching, learning and assessment is always discussed as part of senior manager meetings**

This was seen as a simple check designed to maintain a focus on TLA. The experience of one group member was that teams deliver what they discuss. One college team spent a lot of time discussing their higher education provision but skated over their retention data. Their higher education results were outstanding, their FE retention was not.

**Action 8: Put teaching and learning first on any management or Board agenda (not fourth)**

This built on the previous action based on a widespread experience that too many organisations tended to first discuss financial matters or student numbers, rather than the quality of their provision.
Action 9: Ensure leaders pay attention to the teacher voices, not just the student voices

The group agreed that student voices were important but a focus on TLA demanded that teacher voices should never be neglected. Leaders should consider how the teacher voice is heard and respected. The group thought that many of the mechanisms used to hear the student voice could be adapted for teacher voice as a starting point, and jointly planned CPD was another mechanism (see Action Point 13).

Structural changes at an organisational level

We noted some profound changes in the further education landscape that could have an impact on the aim of increasing the priority given to teaching and learning. The recent Area Based Review (ABR) process had the explicit aim of developing larger, more resilient colleges. At the same time, many income streams had been opened up to new entrants, creating a much more competitive environment. In addition, the introduction of a new insolvency regime for colleges placed additional burdens on governing bodies and there has been a major focus on improving governance in the further education sector.

These changes meant that very large colleges were often recruiting Chief Executives without previous experience of education or public service. Fearful of new insolvency rules (given the generally parlous financial health of the further education sector), Corporations might be feeling a need to strengthen the financial and commercial skills of their Boards.

The group agreed that executive and non-executive leaders could take the following specific actions to make concern for teaching and learning more visible:

Action 10: Appoint governors with expertise in teaching, learning and assessment

Further Education Boards need of course to contain financial, human resources and business expertise given their remit as a major employer and a body legally accountable for large amounts of taxpayer funds. However, the central purpose of the organisation is education and this needs to be reflected in the non-executive structure as well as the formal executive structure.

Action 11: Appoint Principals with experience of education

Of all the actions proposed, this provoked the most discussion. The important point that was agreed was that the most senior person in the organisation must see themselves as an educator. This was not a function that could or should be delegated as it related to the whole purpose of the organisation. A Principal needed to be sufficiently confident, and have knowledge and expertise, to demonstrate leadership of TLA in line with the actions set out earlier. It was particularly important the most senior leader was comfortable attending meetings related to TLA, could confidently encourage (and challenge) dissenting views etc. It did not preclude Principals form non-teaching disciplines but did require a determination to become an educational leader and enjoying that description. The group felt more research should be undertaken on the background of Principals and the educational effectiveness of their institutions given the changing nature of appointments and senior structures (group structures) as colleges grow in size.
**Investment that embeds teaching and learning as a priority**

One of the advantages of working in further education is the amount of data freely available to allow organisations to compare themselves to others. This goes beyond simple league table comparisons. Colleges in particular can now compare how much they spend on teachers, on buildings, on teaching resources etc. We agreed that organisations putting TLA first would invest more heavily than others in a few particular areas.

**Action 12: Increase the proportion of expenditure invested in TLA activities**

This is much easier said than done. The group thought that colleges in particular should identify spending on TLA including less visible activities. This would be a useful baseline. Being open about where money was being spent would also allow some interesting challenges. How much is spent on teaching resources compared to IT equipment? How much on building adjustments compared to equipment? The group thought that too often budget discussions did not compare spending in this way. A TLA-focused organisation would always be looking to increase the proportion of funding invested in these activities.

**Action 13: Invest in CPD that is jointly planned by staff and management**

The group agreed that professionals must take personal responsibility for their development, but good employers would wish to invest in the development of their staff. The most effective way to use CPD budgets was through jointly planned activity as this got immediate staff buy-in, enabled healthy debate (and therefore evidence to support proposed CPD priorities) and visibly demonstrated the priority given by senior leaders to TLA.

**Action 14: Invest in good Student Voice mechanisms**

We agreed that student voice went well beyond responding to the odd survey. Better quality provision and better TLA depends on building a broader relationship with students that might include activity like involving students in resource allocation decisions (budget process), curriculum and timetable design etc.

**And finally…**

Overall the group thought the above actions were appropriate for most organisations providing further education. They were simultaneously relatively easy to undertake but also difficult in the sense that they were not one-off actions. Leaders would need to keep testing that they were remaining true to the commitments.

When we reviewed them in total there was still a feeling that something was missing. That something was identified as communicating this work externally, especially to government.
Action 15: Tell government what works (and what doesn’t)

Government makes frequent, big changes in further education policy. Ministers want to make their mark. The DfE continues to have few staff with a detailed knowledge of the sector and this can lead to some big mistakes or ineffective policy development.

We agreed that the sector must shoulder some of the responsibility for this. Research by practitioners is under-developed and we have been slow to develop a body of knowledge on strategies, policies and practices that work.

Our final action was therefore to get colleges and other further education providers, individually and collectively, to lead government thinking on post-16 TLA. In the end, if the sector’s institutions put TLA first, government will be able to put listening first, and we will have achieved a common purpose.

Conclusion

If TLA is the first priority then the organisation’s routines and habits must reflect that in a way that it is almost unconscious. Leaders are key to making that happen. The core elements are: appointing executive and non-executive leaders with expertise in TLA; involving themselves personally in discussions about TLA; using the resources available to them to invest consistently in TLA; and supporting their staff (not just teaching staff) to experiment, criticise, reflect and develop their expertise. Finally, leaders should also take responsibility for raising the profile of post-16 TLA with funding agencies and government, so that funding reinforces the primacy of TLA.

Although the group did not specifically address the question of which leadership model might be best placed to deliver this agenda, the recurring theme of being open to dissent, criticism and experimentation, and regarding all input as helpful, suggests that it would be worth exploring a model of “creative abrasion” put forward by Jerry Hirshberg (1999), where battles of ideas lead to better progress and team cohesion.

Author Bio: Ian Pryce is Chief Executive of Bedford College, a role he has held for 20 years. He was previously a finance director at the FEFC, in retail, the electricity industry and local government. He is also a syndic of Cambridge University and chairs the regulatory committee of Cambridge Assessment.

References