

Checking the pulse – going from bad to worse

Revisiting *TAKE 2: The pulse of further education*
The Great FE & Skills Survey of 2015
- six months on



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Introduction

Six months on from the 2015 Policy Consortium/FE Week survey of the state of the FE sector, we interviewed 32 of the original respondents to revisit the issues in the light of the General Election and subsequent further reforms. Were they more or less optimistic than in March? Had the new ministerial team in government set out a fair and effective set of reforms? What practical impacts (positive, negative or neutral), if any, had they seen in their work and organisation since the survey and election?

We asked for particular thoughts from the interviewees about any of the recent developments in sector policy and funding announcements since April, such as those contained in the FE and Sixth Form Commissioners' letters about college sustainability; the July Budget; the new inspection arrangements and CIF from Ofsted; the Productivity Report; new cuts in the Adult Skills Budget and ESOL funding; the National Audit Office report; and the announcement about Area Reviews of post-16 education and training provision. We asked once again for their greatest area of concern at this point. And finally we asked what one thing they felt would make a positive difference to the sector.

The 32 interview volunteers were representative of the spread of personnel in colleges, training providers and the Third Sector – teachers, managers, leaders, directors and governors. Though we asked them very much for their personal take on developments, they all went more deeply into issues affecting colleagues and the trainees and learners in their charge, giving a fair measure of the “temperature” of the sector as austerity continues to bite. We are grateful to all those who gave of their time, insights and views for this report.

Summary of general views

The new Government has initiated a flood of post-election changes apparently based on little or no evidence and with no published impact assessments – suggesting no clear analysis behind the changes. As a result, a repeated complaint is the inability to plan staffing requirements or learner needs related to those policy changes and a continuing state of uncertainty around big issues such as Apprenticeship Trailblazers and the setting of standards.

The top ten key issues causing moderate to extreme concern emerging from the 2015 survey were:

- levels/rates of institutional funding and adequacy of learner funding
- external bureaucracy
- workload
- the pace and volume of change
- maths and English assessment and capacity to deliver
- the broad government 'direction of travel' for FE and skills
- complexity of the offer
- specialist teachers e.g. of English, maths and/or vocational subjects
- capital funding and
- inconsistent Ofsted assessments.

These views were expressed by between 72% and 92% of more than 700 people who participated in the survey. The latest interviews suggest that little has changed since April other than a sense that these matters are getting worse still.

Common responses from interviewees:

“It still feels [like] the sector is in a mess.”

“Collaboration is out of the window – entrenchment of providers’ self-centred competitiveness towards survival.”

“Things have got worse since Easter.”

“Funding remains primary concern.”

“[There is] extreme concern about levels of adult funding and the issues around GCSE Maths and English resits.”

“No change; I’m just more worried.”

“It’s getting worse not better.”

“Getting worse – a tsunami coming, options narrowing, classroom learning is getting a lower priority and everything is being pushed towards Apprenticeships.”

“[There is a] fear for the survival for FE.”

A wish list

When we asked what one development would make a positive difference to the sector, deeper and longer-term concerns emerged. The wish for more cash and less bureaucracy inevitably featured strongly; first because of the resentment felt over the decision to target austerity measures so heavily at FE and, second, because respondents felt ministers had failed in their promises to significantly cut bureaucracy. Significant wishes included:

- trust to do the job
- review non-mandatory staff qualifications
- finalise Trailblazers and standards as originally promised (without burden of bureaucracy already emerging)
- more trust in providers (with proper accountability and safeguards) without being constantly subjected to manipulation from the centre
- focus on education not data
- greater consistency from Ofsted, without shifting the goalposts on teaching and learning
- carry through the dual mandate (nothing has changed since Foster’s “squeezed middle child”)
- focus on quality, not quantity
- make funding truly responsive to employers’ needs
- more flexibility over funding and approval, but ring-fence funds to support first steps learning
- focus less on qualifications that maximise income and more on what the learner needs to build competence
- end school incentives to hold onto pupils even when inappropriate and
- better IAG : providers offer what young people ask for, rather than being able to rely on well informed career advice.

Muddled ministerial thinking makes the mission impossible

Despite the high levels of anxiety, there is a strong willingness among those interviewed to make a success of the reforms. Where Apprenticeships are strong and employment is improving, colleges and other providers report some increase in learner recruitment. This is sporadic, however, and there is little or no confidence that the reforms will take a hold and flourish within the foreseeable future.

A very big part of the problem arises from the record austerity spending cuts being focused overwhelmingly on FE. As adult basic skills disappears and there is a seeming lack of comprehensive commitment to VET and vocational qualifications – the academic route still dominates ministerial thinking from 5 to 19 – FE sees only a future of narrowing paths and erosion, in particular, of adult and community learning. ACL is, in the view of several interviewees, totally undervalued in its potential to empower people, build communities and improve the prospects of the country as a whole. Moreover, even those with reasonably strong business links say the relentless change and lack of joined-up policy means employers see the sector as inconsistent and so they feel unable to follow through and commit their organisations to such reforms.

Ministerial thinking is seen as muddled. A good example of this is around the proposals for more specialist colleges – on which there is a lack of detailed information. Small specialist colleges already provide STEM Apprenticeships with employers and should have a strong continuing role. However, there is deep concern that, instead of being treated as national exemplars, they will be ‘drowned out’ by broad-brush policies such as Area Reviews. As one senior adviser to government warned during interview: there will be “collateral damage, unintended and lamented by all”. If changes saw a positive rebirth of polytechnics, complemented by 14-18 colleges this would be a good thing, he suggested. “If things go less well, the schools system and the GCSE exam system will continue to fail the young and FE will be smaller but more unwieldy, cheaper, nastier and less accessible to those who need a second chance to succeed and older people who need learning to sustain an active and purposeful life.”

There are further tensions caused by public-sector pay constraints since, as more than one respondent has pointed out, private-sector pay rises make it difficult to attract and retain well-qualified, highly-skilled people “...staffing in a STEM apprentice-focused business is challenging and will be for the sector as a whole...”

Similarly, there are general complaints about too much bureaucracy – new form-filling, etc., around the different frameworks, and merely replacing what has been cut. The pace of change also creates the risk that employers will lose confidence in the sector. Moreover, young people who are ignorant of their potential choices “because of the lousy careers advice” will not gain confidence in FE. Andrea Webb, Centre Manager for Profile

Development and Training and an assessor for City and Guilds, said: “There are too many changes all at once to take on effectively. More and more young people are not able to stay on at school for appropriate support and learning. We are working with schools to identify and put together packages, but still have a long way to go.” Suzanne Savage, a teacher at South Worcestershire College, pointed to another generally-held concern over the impact of FE cuts on young people. “Cuts affect 50% of young people; if this were done to the NHS there would be marching in the streets,” she said.

Colleges and providers face many such extra and unforeseen costs that are not mentioned by ministers in policy and funding announcements. Many such costs emerged in the interviews, such as the safeguarding of young people that includes Prevent work and moves to counter radicalisation and promote British values etc. In addition, staff were having to spend too much time tracking and recording targets. Colleges were also expected to work through links with equally under-funded local authorities.

Below we look at some of the areas focused on most frequently by participants in the follow-up interviews carried out during August and September.

Funding

With nine out of ten respondents to the original survey expressing concern over the impact of the 24% funding cuts (at that time), topping-off five years of austerity, they might well have thought that things could not get worse, surely – but they have. Further cuts to spending on adult basic skills announced in July appeared finally to be pushing many colleges over the edge. In the words of one principal: “A previously forecast surplus will now in fact be a deficit because of the 3.9% cut.” A senior manager of a large Midlands college said it had an immediate impact amounting to £160,000. “We are now looking even more keenly at finding ways to take advantage of the shift in funding through FE loans.” Some colleges talk of “seven-figure deficits”.

State funding support for older students has indeed been switching rapidly from grants to loans. This will only increase, despite disastrous take-up to date of the available Loans budget, again worse than predicted six months ago. Rates for 16-19 funding are frozen and government is pressing ahead with the transfer of skills funding to employers despite evidence from employer ownership pilots that it doesn’t work. Nor is the evidence emerging from the apprenticeship funding consultation and Trailblazers much better (see the Apprenticeships section, below), as respondents from training provider groups repeatedly testified in our interviews.

The recent NAO report castigating the performance of the Skills Funding Agency accused colleges of being over-optimistic in funding forecasts. The latest survey interviews point,

however, to “an impossible situation” for training providers as well as colleges. A senior curriculum manager for a large workforce development provider in the North East summed up the overwhelming majority view, saying: “you can’t plan when you don’t know how much you are going to get. Cuts to adult funding are no good.”

And yet determined efforts are being made to bridge the funding gaps through loans and exploration of wider market opportunities. Typical responses in interview were: “We need to share services”; “We know employers are in the driving seat” and “We will simply have to accept that the new maxim is Apprenticeships, Apprenticeships, Apprenticeships”.

There were considerable doubts as to whether employers were sufficiently well-informed to take control of funding. This was reported as an issue with SMEs in particular that may not want any extra bureaucracy and/or lack the ability and knowledge to negotiate fees and understand what they are paying for. Already, increasing competition among providers was exacerbating this and there was a growing downward pressure on fees with potential impact on quality. This was being seen in particular where providers waive fees for post-19s and adults generally

Nevertheless, too many funding uncertainties prevail even here. David Sherlock, former head of the Adult Learning Inspectorate, member of the Lingfield Inquiry committee and chair of PROCAT (Prospects College of Advanced Technology), encapsulated the general concerns over funding. “The funding system is designed for contraction not growth, as the gradual decline in numbers shows,” he said. “There have to be measures to meet national priorities without institutions having to bear all the risk. The current position would not be acceptable in business. It should not be forced on governing bodies in VET.” In other words, the Government expects colleges to behave like businesses but without the investment needed in order to succeed.

There is some optimism over the employer levy to fund Apprenticeships – a position supported (with many caveats) by the CBI and TUC, but only if funding arrangements for SMEs are well designed for ease and fairness. “They ameliorate tensions between government funding priorities 14-18 and employer demand for 18-plus Apprenticeships,” said David Sherlock. But few respondents believed the Government would deliver on this. And there was a general view that however well colleges and providers managed the austerity cuts, the Chancellor George Osborne would be back for more.

Two dominant messages emerge with regard to funding. First, there is a sense in which the whole strategy is rushed, austerity-driven and focused on diverting cash to protected school budgets. Second, there is a widely-held view that only the narrowest of skills-related training around Apprenticeships and impoverished Traineeships matter to government and, in the view of ministers, deserve public funds.

Most of all, respondents could see “not only a car crash, but a multiple pile-up” from the unintended consequences of conflicting government funding policies, compounding the damage of previous cuts. In the words of a college principal in the West Country: “Government is unfairly targeting FE but leaving schools, academies and private providers as protected bodies.” The associated push on academic studies in schools reinforces “training for trades” as a lesser option for the least-qualified students in under-funded colleges.

Two respondents pointed out that even in post-16 special institutions (SPIs) where funding is protected, the national minimum wage and subsequent living wage will cause problems, as many care workers will be in scope for rises that will not be funded. Also, there are big extra costs from links with under-funded local authorities and “no growth cash to cover it”. Others pointed to issues such as the Prevent work around terrorism, following the online manipulation of an autistic student, which “led to government requirement to buy new security software – again unfunded”. Another said: “None of the additional costs are acknowledged by ministers and they would be naive to pre-suppose they can be solved overnight through LEP arrangements and the market.” In the view of a senior college manager, one might hope that past experience of cuts will have developed a capacity to cope, but no-one could be certain. “‘Past performance is no guarantee of future performance’, as they say – and their experience over recent years may in the end not be ‘adequate and sufficient’ for what’s coming.”

Few are optimistic that the Dual Mandate will see light of day. Moreover, the once-bright idea of eliminating the notion of FE as the “squeezed middle child”, as Andrew Sir Andrew Foster put it in his 2005 review of colleges, is as remote as ever. “Nothing has improved in that respect since Foster,” once respondent commented.

David Sherlock could see the logic of much of what the government was aiming at, but queried whether it would succeed. “There is, in the Chancellor's vision of localism, balanced by national provision to meet the needs of the global economy, the seeds of something grand and sustainable within an entirely different system of financial support. Realising that, however, will require so much higher a level of policy formation and administration than has been evident in national government for many years past, that a degree of scepticism cannot be avoided.”

Loans

Sector leaders know that for a huge number of post-19 adults a system of loans is the only option. Several respondents said they were looking to loans to maximise funded opportunities. Nevertheless, as one CEO said: “There is a high level of resistance to loans with the scrapping of government support for adult education and training.” Another

echoed the views of many in saying: “Planning for providers is completely uncertain. It is unclear how these [loans] are to be presented to learners.” Others said that while they felt clear about how to present loans, people simply did not want them and there was a tough selling job to be done. One principal said: “Loans in FE are still a big, big culture change and will not provide the resources we need overnight.”

Apprenticeships

Nowhere are the doubts and uncertainties around future developments more profound than in the area of Apprenticeships. Despite all the reviews and stop-go pronouncements on future funding during five years of Coalition Government, there is a feeling – even among their staunchest supporters – that ministers “still don’t get it”.

Andrea Webb, company manager and assessor for City and Guilds, summed up what most respondents felt, saying: “There is too little information to keep employers informed and a lack of clarity over standards governing qualifications. There are concerns that Apprentices and Trainees are being sold short.” And, as we saw in the section above on funding, there is support for the employer levy, but only “if it is well conceived in detail”, as David Sherlock says this would take colleges and provides such as PROCAT back to their roots as employers’ training groups associations (GTAs), established under the Industrial Training Act 1964. It would be good too for STEM subjects. But there is a huge unsolved problem in how this would map out for SMEs – an urgent issue, if the Government is to see three million starts by 2020.

The lack of clarity and the contradiction between the aims of such target-setting and the purpose of Trailblazers also raises concerns. Already, the aim to keep things simple is failing since early Trailblazers are producing pages of detail, bureaucracy and potential red tape around embryonic standards, contradicting FE minister Nick Boles’ pledge to the contrary.

There are also grave doubts that the Traineeship notion can work in the way ministers envisage, in a whole range of industries. The chief executive of a very big training provider for the hotel trade said: “Traineeships will only work in specialist industries, not hotel and catering.” Others echoed the sentiment, with variations on “you can’t make them train” unless you regulate, which this government is unlikely to do, though the leaving age is now 18. “The 3m (Apprenticeship) target is not compatible with Trailblazers; one or other has to go,” said the chief executive. “The government is imposing changes no-one wants to implement; there is no quality control at all in the new Trailblazers; they can and are getting away with virtually no training. Putting all the emphasis on employers with no quality control may reduce the value of Apprenticeships.”

This concern was echoed by the head of a large Third Sector GTA who said: “[We are] pleased government has recognised the importance of work experience and industry Apprenticeships, but concerned about the push for quantity over quality.”

Far worse, questions are being raised as to whether Trailblazers are being adequately conducted. Lesley Ellis, a director of Inter Training Services Ltd, which provides training and assessors for the hairdressing industry, said: “Trailblazers are great in theory but not popular [for example in hairdressing].” Awarding bodies’ efforts to try fitting qualifications into Apprenticeships were “hopelessly unrealistic”, she added. “A survey of 60 leading employers by one college found none had been consulted. Some of the assessment strategies could only be delivered by colleges, reducing potential of employers and training providers.”

There is also widespread concern among college staff, managers and independent training providers that Apprenticeships are being made the only show in town. The South Worcestershire College teacher, Suzanne Savage, said: “FE is being destroyed for Apprenticeships, which are not the answer for those who need vocational preparation and for whom opportunities are being curtailed.” Likewise, the director of a skills academy said: “It’s good that there’s funding for Apprenticeships but these are not the only answer. Flexibility to meet other employer needs – training people in work and older people in general – is essential.” And the head of curriculum and quality at a large training provider said: “Employers don’t recognise the support Apprentices need or the fact that they don’t come with ready-made skills.”

There is also evidence, despite the exhortations of ministers, that far too few employers are coming forward, leading providers to cut corners or break the law. Colleges say they still have to “create jobs” in admin departments for business studies-related Apprenticeships. Also, tutors in colleges and training providers say employers are put off by the already growing bureaucracy. One tutor commented: “Employers are still in the dark about how the levy will work. There’s still too much bureaucracy [and it’s growing as standards are overwhelmingly detailed despite government assurances]. “We don’t need all this.” Another said: “Private training providers are acting illegally – taking Apprentices without an associated employer.”

The responses in interviews show a considerable willingness to back the government on Apprenticeships, but despair over the uncertainties. They also show the mountain that ministers must climb if they are to hit their targets. Fiona Himsforth, head of functional skills for York City Council, said: “I am positive but for the lack of clarity or agreement on target groups.”

The tutor for one training group asked: “What’s happening with Trailblazers? Where is funding going? There are lots of grey areas. It is difficult to clarify and unscrupulous

organisations are using this to make money giving incorrect information to students. There is not enough timely information.”

Finally, the chief executive of one of the largest training providers in the UK said: “Apprenticeships are a good route; degrees are not the only way. But business planning for all this is difficult, to the point of impossibility.”

Area Reviews

“Area Reviews need one key adjustment in order to give them any chance of being properly effective in the view, *nem con*, of respondents to the survey: they must include all schools, academies, Third Sector organisations, private training providers and ACL/training-related local authority services. Conflicting statements in government review documents for Area Reviews – saying the focus will be on colleges, while inviting other providers wishing to be part of it to let BIS know – have done nothing to inspire confidence in the exercise. It is seen as thinly-disguised central government control that also “side-steps the pressing issue of the uneven playing field between schools and colleges.”

In the view of one former quango chief, Area Reviews are skewed to mergers and dictats of the FE Commissioner, making cuts operate according to centralised power. “Although the language used is that governors will decide, this is more of a Russian roulette game if a decision is made by governors not to follow the directive from the FE Commissioner and which the SFA expects to see as a result.”

Several are concerned that “misinformed” LEPs are involved in this partial exercise, although the overall view of LEPs is divided, with many leaders being very supportive.

Several respondents said mergers were an ulterior motive based on misinformation about the effectiveness of such reforms. Chris Davies, director of curriculum at Staffordshire College, said: “There are concerns about the negative impact of cuts and planned Area Reviews that suggest mergers. We know larger colleges do not always result in better quality or performance, or greater financial stability.”

Many saw the exercise as pointless, without a clearer vision of what the Government had in mind for FE. David Sherlock, chair of PROCAT, doubts whether Area Reviews will produce “the degree of rationalisation of colleges envisaged for them” or any of the transformations envisaged by the designation of Institute of Technology. “We need more information about the future envisaged for FE, including whether it will exist at all or be divided into a further widened secondary sector and new HE/skills/tertiary sector.”

Too many imponderables remained for there to be any sensible area rationalisation any time soon, respondents said. This included conflict between the “specialise” agenda and “access” and “travel to learn” issues. The chief executive of a successful adult education college asks whether it should merge with a general provider or take the lead for other adult learner providers in the region. “It’s problematic for governance and funding reasons.” Many support a rationalisation of the sector but argue that the government-imposed notion of the Area Review is not the way forward. Fiona Himsworth said: “I am in favour of greater collaboration but cuts and restructuring can make it difficult. There are excellent regional networks in Yorkshire and Humberside, including Functional Skills and family learning, but organisational mergers may reduce local flexibility and responsiveness.”

There were concerns too that the voluntary nature of inclusion in the reviews would tempt some to avoid being included in order to steal an advantage. This was even observed by a senior player in the Third Sector who said: “The Area Reviews are oddly configured. They are focussed on colleges and don’t seem to include Third Sector outfits like us, so how do they constitute a full picture? They should look at the totality of provision: LAs, private providers, charities. Bear in mind that lots of college provision is delivered through sub-contracts and many of the suppliers are relatively unregulated. I reckon there are about 3,300 sub-contract arrangements in English FE and some of those are big contracts with providers subject to very little scrutiny.”

ESOL

A common complaint during interviews was that the impact of the end of mandatory ESOL funding has had a really damaging effect on wider social integration and this will intensify. There were warnings that there would “be no community cohesion if (English) language is not developed”. A senior administrator for a charity that provides learning for the most disadvantaged said: “With 30% cuts, we are having to close down operations in deprived areas...such as...ESOL. Having cut to the core, we are now cutting into provision and are not alone in this.” A senior manager at a workforce development company was emphatic in support. “ESOL is important and if needed should be funded,” she said. Others pointed out that the move contradicted government claims that it was about promoting social integration. Louise Mycroft, tutor at the Northern College, said: “It’s stupidity to promote the British values agenda without helping people speak English.” Others said the cut ran counter to the longer-term aims of getting migrants and refugees onto the learning and skills training ladder for wider social and economic benefit of the individual and the community. A senior college manager said that ESOL is being cut in the workplace, yet this needs addressing before we can look at higher educational needs.

Maths and English and Functional Skills

Government policy around Functional Skills and GCSE was seen as inconsistent, with resits required in some areas but not others (e.g., Traineeships), where many learners are unsuited to GCSE. It confuses employers and is taught by ill-equipped teachers lacking the required skills. The director of curriculum at Staffordshire College, Chris Davies, said English and Maths were “causing major problems in the sector, stress on staff to deliver and stress on the administration of it – stressed, demoralised staff.”

The lack of trained, qualified teachers in colleges and training providers was identified as a core problem. Andrea Webb, company manager and assessor for City and Guilds, said: “Functional Skills going to GCSEs by the end of Apprenticeships doesn’t help because sub-contractors who can’t develop this provision have to farm it out – which raises the issue of double funding. Why can’t functional skills be fit for purpose and contextualised to what a working adult needs in life, rather than doing a full GCSE? We have to turn a lot of young people away as we can’t offer this.”

This raised again the question of pay rates. “We don’t have enough trained teachers to deliver English and maths and we can’t match schools for terms and conditions, so where are we going to get them from?”

Even those most supportive, who saw these particular reforms as a success, warned that the Government was shooting itself in the foot by making the cuts. One curriculum manager said: “I am very pleased with value-added on English and Maths – this has been beneficial over the past three years and continues to attract learners; but we will not be able to provide for all of them this year because of the cuts.

So there were very mixed messages: the government was successful in promoting English and maths, “where once we had to drag them onto courses”, said one senior tutor. “But funding isn’t sufficient to meet demand and we will have to turn people away this year. If we sign everyone up, we will run out of money by mid-year. New funding pots and the lack of ring-fencing on first steps learning means the hardest to reach will get least support.”

Adult learning and skills

The backlash of cuts to adult basic skills was reported by virtually everyone. Intended or unintended, the most deprived and least likely to have access to other resources or loans are, so far, being hit hardest. Responses chime with the Association of Colleges’ warning that “adult education and training in England will not exist by 2020 if the Government continues with its swathe of cuts to the adult skills budget”. That was in March, when the

loss of 190,000 adult learning college places was predicted and before the further 3.9% cut was announced.

The impact since the election has been even sharper than predicted. Fiona Himsworth said: “With so many services disappearing, partnership is harder – hitting vulnerable learners – adults with mental health problems. I agree with the government aim of reducing dependency on welfare, but it’s ill-thought-through since many have problems such as mental illness issues.” A senior college manager also pointed out the issue and said: “Cuts will affect hard-to-engage learners less able to support themselves without parental support or financial backing. SEN will certainly be affected.”

Redundant workers are next in line. “Delays in EU funding led to redundancies among skilled workers; similarly with ABS (adult basic skills) cuts, we are losing high-skill staff and expertise. Ironically, if we are successful through LEP bids we won’t be able to hire staff again.” This was repeated by several respondents. A manager from a large general FE college in the North West said: “Cuts to adult education where ABS is 50% means there’s a need to narrow the curriculum and refocus education. This will have an impact on adults who are unable to pay full cost.”

The swathe of cuts to adult basic skills since the election was stultifying, said Chris Davies. “How can colleges – supposed to be businesses – plan when conditions of funding change? It threatens delivery and threatens staff morale. There is no confidence that Ofsted will find anything but issues related to funding and (hence) quality and success will be low.”

Perversely, ABS cuts are a boon to providers that offer skills training cheaply via sub-contractors, said the head of one such company, “but it’s hard to upskill staff struggling to cope with the changes.”

There is almost no area left unscathed by the cuts. Return-to-learn programmes have been cut, despite the retention of the safeguarded £210m, adult and community learning fund. There were suggestions that this is being siphoned-off for skills training to compensate for the loss of budgets. Whatever is happening, there is a big reduction in return-to-learn adults who used to progress from around Entry L3 to L2 and find subsequently find work. This is a development, said one college manager, that always gives satisfaction and improves family learning. “When a child sees a parent continually learning and growing, it sets a precedent and helps them aspire to being whatever they want to be.”

A typical example of the sort of person cited in interviews as losing out was an adult housewife who could not help her children with their homework through poor literacy. She was encouraged with the support of FE staff to re-enter a class. After several tries and the failure to pluck up enough, she finally went to class. “She progressed to reach L2 in maths and English and is now confident in a full-time job.”

Localism

The jury is out on localism. Most people want more local control and opportunities to collaborate with partners; but most respondents say the pressure is towards aggressive competition and a spiral of driving prices down – in the end, at the cost of quality. There is also ambivalence over the role of LEPs. One provider said: “There is real potential here for cross-fertilisation of ideas, provided we don’t end-up recreating the old training and enterprise councils.” Another commented that the Local Authority grip on LEPs in the South West is exacerbating pre-existing political tensions. “London-centrism is a big issue that may be repeated across the nation with devolution to big metropolitan areas.”

Similarly, work-based learning opportunities should flourish under localism. However, there are fears that dual threats from domination by big companies and pressures to cut prices will undermine this. The chief executive of a big national provider of work experience said: “I feel positive about WBL, moves for work experience, support for study programmes, Apprenticeships and Traineeships, but negative about prospects for small organisations as austerity bites. Bureaucracy is unmanageable. SMEs can’t compete with big conglomerates. There’s too much emphasis on numbers – quantity, where quality should matter. Quality should be part of the mandatory process.”

Inspections

There were mixed messages too over inspection reforms. One college director said: “I am more reassured about Ofsted – with reservations.” Another said: “CIF changes mean there’s too much to do in the working day. Inspection is too subjective and not concentrating on things useful to us. There needs to be a louder voice for training providers.”

Louise Mycroft, the Northern College tutor, said: “It’s all on the cheap, but we must fight back. We have changed our direction from cheap to quality – and the inspectors love it.” South Worcestershire College teacher, Suzanne Savage, said: “Ofsted is shifting the goalposts on evaluation of teaching and learning. Does teaching and learning change so much every couple of years that Ofsted must constantly revise the way they evaluate it?”

There were many complaints along the lines of: “their [Ofsted’s] assessment methods seem empty and ineffective.” Others, however, shared the sentiments of Fiona Himsworth, of York City Council, who said: “It’s quite encouraging, seeing what’s going on.”

Many called for Ofsted to have greater powers over employers' in-house provision of training. The chief executive of a large hospitality training provider said: "Ofsted has no jurisdiction over employers beyond functional and key skills – and they should have."

David Sherlock was more optimistic, saying: "Ofsted is better in some areas; there is a growing movement among tutors and managers who want to improve things. There's more hope now."

Conclusion

A clear message from the majority of people interviewed was that the far-reaching reforms will lead to unintended and damaging consequences, making skills training and social integration all the more difficult. If there was any substantial impact assessment behind the flood of reforms introduced since the General Election then this has yet to be adequately communicated to the practitioners at every level, from teacher and workshop tutor to director and chief executive.

Concerns they raised in the original survey in March (*TAKE 2: The pulse of further education The Great FE & Skills Survey of 2015*), around issues including bureaucracy, workload and the pace and volume of change, have not been ameliorated. Ministers made many pledges to increase freedom for colleges to manage themselves and to cut bureaucracy, but few of those interviewed reported any significant evidence of this; if anything, things have grown worse. For every leader and manager reporting new opportunities and potential growth behind initiatives such as the target for 2020 of three million Apprenticeship starts, there are many more who see largely curtailment of opportunity and contradiction in conflicting policies. The Apprenticeship drive is a potentially bold and ambitious strategy, virtually everyone interviewed agreed; but only as part of a well-thought-out array of policies, which, they say, the current offering is lacking.

Despite the high cost in stress and workload levels, and credits for any achievements going to the politicians, FE practitioners remain determined to provide a professional and effective service in the face of impossible constraints and contradictions in both funding and policy. That much is clear from what the original survey responses and in-depth interviews say six months on. But the decision of the Treasury and ministers responsible for post-16 and adult provision to focus such deep education spending cuts on FE colleges and providers will make it difficult, inevitably hitting hardest the most disadvantaged learners, they insist. They see such decisions as neither fair nor effective. Worse, it will result in deteriorating provision for school leavers who fail over the next few years, through no fault of their own, and need the help of FE. The loss of at least 190,000 jobs, which the AoC has predicted as a result of the

24% budget cut, will only serve to put further strain on the entire system, several people warned during the interviews.

Another common concern among the interviewees was that initiative after initiative seemed to be developed piecemeal, on the hoof (with many seemingly worthy reforms cutting across each other). There was irritation, shared by many, over the “inadequacy” of consultation reports from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, such as the August paper, *Apprenticeships levy: employer owned apprenticeships training*, that specifically equates commitment to training with involvement in apprenticeships, even though this was patently inappropriate for so many learners.

There is considerable concern over “incoherence” and “contradiction” from government around pressing issues such as the wind-down of adult education and the end of mandated ESOL which, they say, negates effort to carry through wider social cohesion policy. Similarly, a concern shared equally by colleges and training providers is around the perceived inadequacy of prior consultation over Apprenticeships. The shortage of sufficient and adequately qualified teachers to fulfil Maths and English policy is leaving many managers and staff in a state of anxiety. And, most of all, they say, there can be no coherence in conducting Area Reviews while schools can stand outside.

There was a big question mark in the minds of several interviewees over the effectiveness of the civil servants. Were they pointing out robustly enough to ministers where proposed reform for FE was undermined by contradictory and conflicting proposals? It was a worry elucidated by former Business Secretary Vince Cable in a comment in *FE Week* (September 21 2015) when he said the whole approach of government is predicated on the assumption that, post-school, only university matters. “You can’t overestimate the extent to which the Civil Service and the establishment generally doesn’t understand FE, doesn’t care about it.”

But still virtually all participants in this survey stressed a desire to see through effective policy change where it was backed by solid evidence. What all participants said in one way or another was, to paraphrase many, “give us the right vehicle or change the destination because we can’t get where you want like this”.