



To: All Chairs and Principals/CEOs of Corporations and FE Institutions

17 October 2014

Dear Colleagues

In my first two letters to the sector I considered the lessons that could be learned from the interventions undertaken to date in the areas of governance, leadership and financial management.

I would now like to turn my attention to the area of quality improvement and consider why quality is so much better in some colleges than in others. This is clearly not an easy question to answer as staff members are usually equally well skilled and qualified, student cohorts are broadly similar and there are often no major differences in the suitability and range of resources available. And, of course, success is a combination of high quality provision and financial stability. Yet as we know from Ofsted and others some colleges are flourishing while others continue to struggle with improving quality.

It is tempting to credit/lay the blame on the shoulders of the leadership and management teams and broadly speaking the evidence from the interventions undertaken to date would support this view. But for the sector to improve we need to go deeper than recognising that some leadership and management teams are better than others and examine the underlying characteristics of those that are successful and those that are not.

There are, of course, a number of ways in which these characteristics could be described. For the purposes of this letter, I have chosen to list the main factors under ten main headings:

Clarity - Successful colleges are very clear about their purpose and have the needs of local learners and employers at the heart of their operation. They have a clear mission, vision, set of values and strategy that are well communicated and understood throughout the institution. In many ways they may be considered to be risk averse but new ventures that move the college away from its core function are subject to careful scrutiny and analysis before they are undertaken. Potentially exciting and profitable opportunities are only undertaken when it is clear that they will contribute to the core mission and not detract from it. The priority is a curriculum suited to local needs, having the right student on the right course and providing levels of teaching and support that will lead to high levels of achievement.

Connectivity - The best college leadership and management teams are very aware of what is happening in the sector (and elsewhere). They have good formal and informal networking arrangements with relevant individuals and organisations at all levels. They have a deep understanding and solid relationship with businesses. They continually benchmark the college against the performance of others and constantly seek out better practice to enable them to implement often small but significant improvements in their operations. In many of the colleges visited to date, this has been missing. A key characteristic has been that they have been inward looking rather than outward facing.

Confidence - In the best colleges, senior leadership teams have the range of skills, qualifications and experience to ensure the delivery of high quality provision while being sufficiently self-confident to implement change or ask for help if needed. In a number of colleges where an intervention has taken place there have been highly skilled individuals at senior levels but the balance hasn't always been right. Financial expertise in particular has often been missing and there has been a reluctance to seek help from elsewhere.

Complacency (Lack of) - All staff are actively encouraged to work hard to self-improve and to help others improve without ever being entirely satisfied or complacent. This involves senior teams walking the floor and getting to know their staff individually. Comments made during interventions that the senior team is "invisible" have often been matched by Ofsted judgements of inadequate for leadership and management.

Consistency - In high performing colleges policies and procedures are applied consistently across the institution and managers at all levels insist on 100% compliance. In the same way that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, areas of outstanding practice are

sometimes undermined by poor performance in other areas. Basic requirements - for example that all teachers are observed in the classroom and appraised each year - have compliance rates closer to 50% than 100% in the weakest colleges visited, more often than not due to a lack of an appropriate structure or organisational skills than a lack of co-operation from staff.

Cohesion - The senior leadership team fosters a sense of common purpose and teamwork that centres on the experience and success of the learner from (pre-college) application to (post college) employment/further study. Given the multiple demands on time and resources sifting out what is really important and at the heart of the institution - student success - seems to be lost sometimes in the pursuit of tangential activity at the expense of the core business.

Challenge - Board members and senior managers are not always prepared to hold difficult conversations and deal with problems promptly when they arise. Too often in the colleges that are performing poorly the lack of challenge at Board level in particular has been apparent. There has been too great a willingness to accept the Principal's assurances that all is fundamentally well or that the college is in the same position as everyone else - when clearly it is not. Similarly senior staff have often allowed poor performance in some areas to continue for far too long and only faced up to the situation when a problem has become a crisis.

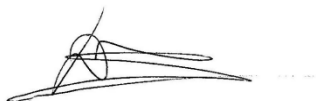
Creativity - Individuals are encouraged and prepared to take *measured* risks and explore new ways of doing things without endangering the success of the core business. The "command and control" model which may work in a crisis does not always get the best out of people or encourage innovation when matters improve.

Celebration - Senior teams recognise the contributions and successes of those throughout the institution and celebrate their and the college's achievements. Praise is more frequent than criticism.

Care - Generic guidelines on how best to support students and staff are provided and individual support where required is available. One size doesn't usually fit all but ensuring that mechanisms are in place to support all students in and around their studies and staff in and around their work is fundamental to institutional success.

All of this, of course, is more “common sense” than “rocket science”. However in the intervention cases to date it is surprising how many of the basics are missing. If a college is having a problem my advice is simple - find someone who is performing well in that area and learn from them. And access support from those who are there to help, such as the Education and Training Foundation. Learning from others is, after all, what Further Education is about.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dr David Collins', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dr David Collins CBE
FE Commissioner