

2012/11

26 October 2012

Policy Watch – Guiding FE

Introduction

The prospect of a Guild for the FE sector moved a step closer this week emerging as a central recommendation in Lord Lingfield's Final Report into professionalism in FE. It's one of a number of proposals in an Inquiry that has lasted nearly a year and taken in much of the FE sector.

The development of a Guild which the Minister has now sanctioned has attracted many of the headlines but in tackling the issue of professionalism in FE, the Inquiry has taken in the wider environment in which FE professionals operate. This has led it down some interesting roads.

The Lingfield Inquiry on FE generally

The Inquiry supports the general trend towards deregulation and simplification as a way of enabling better responsiveness, *"this report intervenes at some point in the midst of the government's pursuit of that rationalisation,"* but elsewhere has come up with some fairly pronounced views of its own. Here are four examples.

- Defining FE's role and purpose. In his major review of FE seven years ago, Sir Andrew Foster caricatured FE as at the centre of a vast galaxy of organisations and different types of learners highlighting why it was difficult to define as a result. Its very diversity and reach has been both a strength and a weakness but eschewing this, the Inquiry, perhaps bravely, steps in to define a set of five hierarchical functions: remedial FE; community FE; Vocational FE; Academic FE; HE in FE. In terms of hierarchy, vocational learning should be tops, community provision should have *"an important subsidiary role,"* HE and FE /HE provision should be unified, while remedial provision and presumably academic provision should be left to schools. The Inquiry believes it's hard to define a vision for professionalism without defining a vision for the sector, hence this approach
- Pulling higher level provision together into a single FE/HE *"post-compulsory sector of education."* The idea of a single funding body for FE and HE higher level provision has been around for some time as a way of creating what Lord Mandelson used to call *'a single membrane of higher level provision.'* The American College model, to which it's also similar, has its attractions at present, partly because it could fill the so-called *'polytechnic-shaped hole'* and partly because it could offer efficiencies. 170,000 students take HE courses in FE at present and the Inquiry believes that a complementary HE Guild could help strengthen such provision
- Bringing some of the representative bodies together. As with other sectors in education, FE is represented by a number of different bodies; the Inquiry for instance cites six including the AoC and AELP who are leading the Guild developments. There are many others including of course professional associations. The Inquiry's view is that the Guild could act as an over-arching body for many of these organisations, one larger voice stronger than a number of smaller ones, and sees UUK's role in HE as a possible model
- Governance. The increasing freedom offered institutions under the New Challenges, New Chances programme has raised a number of questions about the types of governance that should be adopted. The Inquiry believes that *"now may be the time for another decisive step in the rigour of governance"* to be led by LSIS which has been doing a lot of work in this field. The model favoured is the *'comply or explain'* model that forms the basis of the UK Corporate Governance Code. The Code incorporates a number of checks and balances including a separate Chair and Chief Executive and a balance between executive and non exec directors, all of which the Inquiry favours

So just what is the Inquiry recommending on professionalism in FE?

The main recommendation of course is for the creation of a distinct Guild for FE, albeit somewhat more extensive than that originally sketched out by the previous FE Minister. The Inquiry has also: proposed a compact or set of agreed working arrangements in the form of a Covenant; endorsed the concept of chartered status for premium providers; supported a QAA based form of self-assessment for high-performing providers; underlined many of the proposals in its earlier Interim Report while tidying up a couple of bits of unfinished business; and even found time to comment on some issues of pay and rations.

In summary, this is how things now look.

- An FE Guild. Development of this is now to be taken forward by a group including AoC, AELP and others. It would be a membership organisation for both institutions and individuals. The Inquiry believes that along with the more traditional functions of overseeing professional development and support, leading on reputation management and considering the relationship between pay and performance, the Guild could also take a lead as a co-ordinating body for the provision of different awards and qualifications for the sector. The basis for this might be a benchmarking system that the Guild could operate with Awarding Organisations
- An FE Covenant. The concept of an agreed set of working conditions/relationships in the form of a Covenant has emerged from the latest work of the Inquiry. *"We see the Covenant as an important means towards securing the success of the Guild and something to which all Guild members should formally commit."* The model, perhaps surprisingly, appears to be the Covenant agreed by the Armed Forces last year which lays out an agreed set of rights and responsibilities between forces and society. The view is that this approach could be adopted for the FE world
- Chartered status. This would be a recognition that leading providers could aspire to and would be conferred by a Charter awarding body, a distinct body with potentially high-level status. The essence of chartered status would be *'earned autonomy,'* and it would enable institutions to offer their own qualifications and adopt peer review instead of inspections
- Changes to inspection arrangements. In recognition of the sector's maturity and noting that it has operated a system of increasingly sophisticated self-assessment since at least the 1990s, the Report recommends that a system of verified self-assessment is adopted for chartered providers leaving current inspection arrangements to focus on poorly performing providers. Many FE providers already work with QAA on their HE provision and the view is that this approach could be extended to high-quality providers generally
- Continuing Professional Development. Previous conditions were revoked in September following a period of consultation over the summer although of course the requirement for minimum teaching qualifications remains for a year while LSIS consults on developing a simpler system of qualifications. That review is now under way and runs to November 26 looking at a number of generic qualifications at Levels 3, 4, 5 and 7 and specific qualifications for teachers of English, ESOL, maths and disabled learners. At the same time, compulsory registration with the IfL has now stopped, fee awards for in service training have been announced, the fee loan system for accredited in service teacher training will operate from next year, and mutual recognition of school and FE teacher qualifications continues
- Pay and conditions. Recognising that while these were not part of its remit they are part of creating professionalism, the Inquiry put down its marker. It noted that that pay had fallen behind and that lecturers needed to be valued to be able to perform effectively

What happens now?

Here the Guild was less precise; *"we might envisage many of the developments to take place within the next few years."* It suggests there's still some way to go

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