

AoC Annual Conference 2007

Self Regulation Panel Session - Tuesday 29 November 2007

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Today I am going to give you a compressed version of a longer and more detailed proposition presented to the Minister last Friday.

Let me stress that our proposals have developed in collaboration with the sector and the wider system, and we are working to a timetable which would see a new agenda unfolding by the spring of 2008.

Let's take a moment to recall why we are here. We are here because the administration of FE has finally to enter the 21st century. Sandy Leitch himself says that in North America and in Europe, they do skills better than here - our counterpart colleges exult in what we might call a highly focused independence. They prosper by being alert to customer need. They prosper by anticipating shifts in the demand for skills. They prosper by the pride that they, treated as adults by other institutions and functions, can take in their own achievements.

Our ambition is likewise. It is for a Further Education sector comprising respected autonomous, demand-led organisations, acting both individually and collectively within a self-regulation system; in delivering high quality, responsive provision for the benefit of learners, employers, communities and the nation; and operating as a respected and trusted partner of government.

Self-Regulation is all part of the process of making us fit for purpose. It's all part of finally kissing the philosophy and practices of further education regulation of the 20th century goodbye.

All the way through, we were determined to:

- enhance provider autonomy and empowerment
- focus on the needs of learners, employers and communities
- simplify regulatory requirements
- improve accountability to government
- and build on professional confidence and trust.

We had to prove :

- that it would lead to rising performance standards
- that learners would feel the direct benefits of better-run, free-to-innovate, reputation-rich colleges
- that as layers of bureaucracy were removed so the responsibilities of local leadership - outwards to their communities and upwards to ministers - would tighten

And so, this is how we have developed our proposition, developing policies and procedures which promise a quality of oversight which is superior to that which is currently in place.

After a gestation period of over 6 years since the publication of George's report 'Trust in FE', and a year since the Secretary of State's challenge to produce a proposition,

and after a period of feverish activity, we feel that it is now surely time to invite affirmative responses and reactions from our partners in Government.

For along the way too, we have had to keep our ears open to the many debates surrounding our future as a sector, and particularly the changes in the Machinery of Government and the review of regulatory agencies. A Self Regulation framework worth its salt has to be responsive to both weather and climate. It has to be able to bed down in such a way that it is still relevant and flexible ten years from now, whatever the political topicalities of the day. And that's what we believe we have made ready in the proposals sent to the Minister.

In the first year of operation the framework will be developed around the following key objectives:

- enhancing the sector's capacity for self improvement
- responsiveness to the needs of learners and employers
- simplification of the regulatory landscape
- provider governance and codes of conduct under self regulation, delivered through the representative bodies

At the heart of our concept is all of the representative bodies in further education coming together to create a single strategic voice on regulatory matters. It will:

- enable dialogue with government on regulatory matters
- represent and support providers in interpreting and responding to regulatory directives, whilst recognising the distinctive voices of representative bodies from different parts of the sector
- be responsible for developing, implementing and maintaining the framework for self regulation and developing a rolling programme of activity for this purpose.

The representative bodies that have signed up the proposition are:

- Association of Colleges
- Association of Learning Providers
- Sixth Form Colleges Forum
- 157 Group
- Land Based Colleges Aspiring to Excellence
- Mixed Economy Group
- Association of National Specialist Colleges
- National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
- HOLEX National Network of Local Adult Learning Providers

As we move forward so we are trying to keep in line with other changes taking place, notably in the allocation of roles and responsibilities across government departments. The consultations on Machinery of Government changes are scheduled for early in the New Year, and while more consultations are inevitable and welcome, we have simply to quicken the pace of movement.

We envisage a pivotal role for the sector in developing the capacity for self improvement through sector ownership of improvement guidance and support programmes and the national improvement strategy on which these programmes are based. This will ensure the sector assumes direct accountability for its performance and reputation, a key objective of self regulation. We wish the sector to have a strategic role in the further development of the Framework for Excellence, to support both organisational review and development, including self assessment, and to

develop a broader set of outcome measures to demonstrate the sector's contribution to wider government targets, including for communities.

We believe the sector should consider the outcomes of peer review trials which are now being undertaken for the first time across the whole of the FE sector. Once these are substantially tested, the sector should consider the recommendations that are made on the appropriateness of a national peer review and development system. Such a system would allow the inspectorate to focus on the effectiveness of self regulation at a system level, consistent with the role of an external regulator. It is anticipated that Ofsted will give increased recognition to peer review activity. The sector voice will also need to ensure that the statutory framework relating to the composition and structure of governance is compatible with self regulation.

And there are important functions that have to be assumed in order to ensure that we are not overburdened with increases in bureaucracy. Operational responsibilities should therefore be assumed by the sector for:

- the Information Authority
- the Bureaucracy Reduction Group
- the Communications Practitioner Panel

Also, in order to ensure greater responsiveness to the voice of learners, employers and communities, the sector should take responsibility for the National Learner Panel and National Learner Survey, and forge a relationship with the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. Appropriately, the sector's single voice should also take responsibility for the FE Reputation Group

It is an exciting and demanding agenda and we have to mobilise ourselves and our colleagues throughout FE to get pre-adjusted to a new order of things. Self regulation is a way of seeing things differently and it's a programme of work.

Thank you