

# One step further Comment/The new body

## People expect training to lead to a good career



### David Sherlock Comment

I once received a paper arguing that the further education sector would achieve perfection by 2010. The rhetoric was impressive but the logic behind it fragile. If you are tempted to believe that flawlessness is achievable with no prospect of ever losing your shine, you better get working on it fast. You have two years left before the wind changes and you remain forever stuck as you are.

The author seemed unaware that learning took place anywhere else than in colleges. Unknown to him, too, was the tale told every four years since 1993 of failing colleges startled into life by poor inspection grades and then falling back; a churn of high and low achievers passing and re-passing each other on the wheel of ever-changing performance. Like all other learning organisations, colleges do well when good leadership, good policy and good luck align. When anyone of these deserts them, down they go.

They are not alone. Consider the changing fortunes of, say, General Motors or Northern Rock, let alone those once great names you now struggle to remember at all. Birth, maturity and demise are as much the lot of private organisations as of public. The value of your investment may go down as well as up.

Reality is messy. In his 2005 review of the future role of colleges, Sir Andrew Foster told them they should be something other than they are. A year later Lord Leitch told us all that even if we bust a gut to improve, we are still likely to slip down the international pecking order by 2020. We have all got the message. I heard a college principal say the other day that he wasn't interested in engaging with employers; they are his customers whom he is there to serve. What the Adult Learning Inspectorate, in its blunt way, used privately to call "smug bastard syndrome" seems refreshingly absent from the scene.

It seems a good moment for the birth of a new quality improvement organisation. It stands a fair chance of riding a wave of unease, making a strong contribution to helping us all fulfil Lord Leitch's "very demanding" tasks so that we remain in the top quartile of economic performers. But perhaps the case remains to be proved that we need organisations other than providers themselves. Do they need help to raise

their game or is it the case that in the words of one sage: "Now might be the moment to strip the machine down to its chassis"?

Would providers do just as well or just as badly; would their life cycles run their courses much as they do now; would they respond to Leitch, with nothing but learner and employer demand to keep them driving upwards? Given the fact that employers allegedly now outspend the taxpayer seven-to-one on adult learning, should we run a full-scale free-market experiment with £43bn riding on the result? Use of funding flows to guide provider behaviour would be out of bounds. The sole measures of performance would be learner enthusiasm or opt-out and the eventual triumph or failure of our economy. Colleges and other providers would either thrive mightily or go bust. Every provider would be its own qualification awarding body. That could be what the chassis looks like.

All of us sometimes yearn for Eden before the Fall. What made John Lennon a better artist than George Harrison was that Lennon found the Maharishi's ideas beguiling but grew out of them. In a grown-up world, people care that the qualifications they strive for should be worth something. They also care that an award they earn here should be accepted when they go to work in another country. That's why we have a national qualifications framework that matches the European qualifications framework and we go along happily with the EU notion that trust in qualifications has to be earned through independent verification.

In the grown-up world, people care that education and training really do lead to decent careers and a prosperous country. They know that it's a tough world and that continuous challenge and change are the norm - not just a figment of Gordon Brown's or Sandy Leitch's imagination. When athletes of all kinds are driven to excel, they seek out coaching.

The QIA and CEL did a better job than they are often given credit for. The QIA, at least, had the misfortune to be born when many people, rightly or wrongly, thought that in the Adult Learning Inspectorate and the Learning and Skills Development Agency there were already serviceable organisations capable of doing what was needed. That is no longer true.

Learning providers will need help to deliver self-regulation that deserves our trust. They will need help to survive, let alone thrive, with demand-led funding. They will need help to hit Leitch's targets and the only place to get it is from the new improvement organisation.

Providers will not be perfect by 2010 or ever. But with help they can keep pace with our rising expectations.

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