

Board of Management

Date of Meeting	Wednesday 7 December 2016
Paper No.	BoM3-F
Agenda Item	10
Subject of Paper	Possibility Thinking – Reimagining the Future of Further Education and Skills
FOISA Status	Disclosable
Primary Contact	Paul Little Principal and Chief Executive Julia Henderson Director of Corporate Support
Date of production	29 November 2016
Action	For Noting

1. Recommendations

To note this report and the associated publication for information

2. Purpose of report

To make the Board aware of the publication of an essay by the Principal as part of a collection of innovative and transformational thinking, published by the RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce), an organisation at the forefront of social change for over 260 year, in partnership with the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL).

3. Context

The mission of the RSA is to enrich society through ideas and action. They engaged FE & Skills sector leaders, practitioners and policymakers to look towards possibilities for the sector's future and contribute to a better understood, more resilient and more pro-active FE & Skills sector. FETL is an independent charity and think tank which is working to strengthen the leadership of thinking in further education.

In partnership with FETL, RSA, via this project is engaging FE & Skills sector leaders, practitioners and policymakers to look towards possibilities for the sector's future and contribute to a better understood, more resilient and more pro-active FE & Skills sector with the power to create its own destiny.

The project aims to:

- *Change public and political perceptions of the FE & Skills sector as a sector which has been and can be innovation rich; leading thinking and determining its own future*
- *Give FE & Skills sector leaders the knowledge and confidence to be creative leaders and agents of change, supporting both their responses to current challenges and their longer term goals*
- *Develop a small number of actionable recommendations for policy and practice that could lay the foundations for radical longer changes to the sector*

The Possibility Thinking essays and their implications were considered in a series of three summits bringing together FE & Skills sector leaders, practitioners and policy-makers in Glasgow, Manchester and London.

4. Impact and implications

The collection, entitled Possibility Thinking, focuses on three interconnected and overlapping areas of change that will enhance the FE and skills sector's potential to develop the creative capacities of learners and their communities:

1. *The removal of policy barriers to innovation at institutional, (sub-) regional and system levels. Devolution deals open the possibility for local areas to test out different models, but they are held back by lingering centralising tendencies in government. The apprenticeship levy is an example of how a mechanism with the potential to support employer and provider innovation in delivering outcomes for learners and localities, will likely be undermined by the need to meet the arbitrary national target of 3m apprenticeship starts.*
2. *Greater appreciation of the sector's connection to and integration with place and its potential to liberate the creative potential of localities through regeneration, training for meaningful work and partnerships for local economic growth. Local skills systems need to develop as anchor institutions connecting communities to place. In so doing it will be helping to heal some of the social divides that have become more apparent and divisive in recent times.*

3. *Increased support for a cadre of creative leaders who see their role as leaders of communities as well as institutions, driving a new sectoral self-concept and public understanding built on innovation, in particular in pedagogy and partnership working. This renewed emphasis on leadership should be truly systematised, with the development of tutors' own capacities for innovation at its heart.*

The involvement of the College in hosting the Glasgow summit and the Principal's thought provoking essay, which sought to respond with deliberate idealism about the future of college education, can only build the College's international and world class reputation for learning and teaching and sets the direction for further research and publications from the College. The International Educational Symposium is a further example of this.

8. What if further education colleges went for bold transformation instead of incremental change?

Paul Little

“Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future” **John F. Kennedy**

In September 2010 the college landscape in Scotland was transformed dramatically when the first of a new breed of super colleges, the City of Glasgow College, was successfully established from the pathfinder multi-college merger of three specialist colleges: Central College Glasgow, Glasgow Metropolitan College and Glasgow College of Nautical Studies.

The UK's third largest city became home to a renaissance in college education. The City of Glasgow College, originally occupying 11 legacy city sites, secured an unprecedented £200m in private sector financing and 25 years of funding support from the Scottish government to create what is probably Europe's largest college campus. We number 40,000 students, including nearly 5,000 international students, 1,200 core staff, and 2,500 learning programmes, with world class ambitions. The Scottish college sector, largely insulated from the constant reform of its English counterpart, has successfully reinvented itself into a series of regional colleges with three multi-college regions, reduced the number of colleges from 43 to 26, managed an unprecedented loss of nearly a third of its recurrent funding, the reprioritisation of its curriculum to 16- to 24-year-olds and reclassification to bring colleges clearly into the public sector.

In redefining a new era of Scottish college education and perhaps UK tertiary education, City of Glasgow College is not only unique in the sheer scale of its flagship campus, some 10 times the size of any of the city's hallowed football pitches, but also in the boldness of its strategic intent. It seeks ultimately to guarantee employability and prosperity for its diverse student cohort of some 130 different nationalities, given its partnerships with some 1,500 large and small employers. Scotland has a proud and ancient tradition of academic excellence boasting some of the oldest universities in the UK, yet its colleges have remained largely unseen and uncelebrated,

despite their own rich 200-year tradition dating back to some of the earliest UK mechanics' institutes and useful places of learning for the *common weal*.

We should be celebrating our adaptive and resilient college institutions to help bring about a reevaluation of the term 'college'. Diminishing respect has been exacerbated by the academic drift from the 1960s, the increasing politicisation of social mobility and a media dominated by university educated graduates, but perhaps the tide is turning in the UK. We are entering a 'new normal' era of globalised geopolitical, financial and societal volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA to borrow the military acronym that's made the transition to the mainstream), with the consequence that over this next 50 years, skilling, up-skilling and re-skilling with the latest technology will be more vital than ever. The once-in-a-lifetime opportunity we were given through merger inspired us to rethink the traditional FE business model. Preferring to take the long view, unshackled from a fixation on the urgent, we have planned a super college that is future-proofed for the next 50 years, through a combination of meticulous design, and increasing global partnership and collaboration. Ours is indeed an ambitious educational adventure secured despite the greatest recession in our memory.

Inspiration, excellence and innovation

Dame Ruth Silver notes in her forward to *A Blueprint for Fairness: The Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access*¹ (2016) that: "Access is a whole system problem and it will require system wide change to solve it." It's ironic that some 20 years on from the Dearing Report and the associated Garrick Report in Scotland, the same recommendations for colleges to promote access through degree programmes and articulation routes into universities are still being made. Previous periods of college renaissance in Scotland have led to degree-awarding central colleges becoming universities (Aberystwyth, Glasgow Caledonian, Napier, Paisley [now the University of the West of Scotland] and Robert Gordon) or seen the HE capacity of college consortia consolidated into the single entity that is the University of the Highlands and Islands.

City of Glasgow College, however, remains steadfast in its desire to remain a college even though 60 percent of its funded provision remains at higher education level. While widening access to higher education is an increasingly important dimension of educational policy for securing social mobility and social justice, we feel better placed to respond to this need by remaining as a college. We have a history of attracting some of the most disadvantaged learners in our community and in enrolling or articulating students on HE courses. As impossible as it may appear at first, City of Glasgow College is now, according to Scottish government statistics (December 2015), the third most popular destination for school leavers in Scotland going into HE, while 24 percent of our students live in the most deprived 10 percent of postcodes.

It is frustrating at times when our politicians or policy makers stand up and say that we have world-class higher education in Scotland, yet they rarely mention a large chunk of this that is actually delivered in colleges, and our crucial access role. Creating a super college has drawn the attention of leading civic, political, industrial and media figures to the full continuum of the Scottish tertiary sector, recognising it as multi-layered, personalised

1. The report can be downloaded here: <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00496619.pdf>

and globally connected and not a one size fits all solution. Professor Anton Muscatelli, vice chancellor of Glasgow University, said at a recent City of Glasgow College graduation ceremony:

“The development of the City and Riverside campuses is an achievement to be very proud of. It’s not just good for the college sector and a timely statement of ambition and intent; it’s good for the city of Glasgow and for the future generations who look to develop themselves through education.”

Our education and skills training offering is structured fundamentally around individual students’ needs, aptitudes and aspirations. We are developing our ‘career college’ or Industry Academy approach that offers a demand- and employer-led vocational curriculum alongside a core academic curriculum, underpinned by seamless student support. We secure industry involvement in the design, development and delivery of the curriculum, encouraging employers to support students’ development of core and technical skills as well as the values and behaviours they are looking for in their employees. We work in real-time partnership with industry and commerce to give our students career-enhancing insights, industry standard project briefs and tailored professional placements. This approach gives our students a competitive edge in getting and keeping a job and improve their prospects for getting an even better job.²

Building relationships with industry in this way requires investment in technology at a scale that has only been made possible by the scale of the college post-merger alongside a pro-risk attitude. As an example, we have invested in a new £70m purpose-built maritime education and training campus (Riverside), home to 2,000 marine and engineering cadets and senior officers on Red Ensigns programmes. We invested significantly in state-of-the-art bridge- and engine simulation technology, some five years ahead of anything available in industry and we uniquely have the UK’s first 360-degree simulator and working ship’s engine, operational 24/7.

Our commitment to innovation and investment in the capital resource of the college extends across our £228m campus, facilitating a disruptive renaissance in tertiary education to meet the changing demands of our students and of industry. Leaving outdated Victorian and post-industrial buildings in Glasgow’s metropolitan centre for a new, more coherent campus brings huge new efficiencies and many other, less tangible benefits. Curriculum adjacencies spark off new synergies; centralised scheduling and space optimisation have allowed for ‘new possibilities’ to emerge: roof gardens provide city-centre green space which will be cultivated by our students; our Creative Industry Tower enables the integration of different curriculum pathways. The 5,000 visitors we have welcomed since we opened phase one of our new super campus barely five months ago, enter an intelligent building, technologically rich with a thin client capacity to enable all students to bring their own devices.

2. 84 percent of students progressed into a job or to full time further study in 2014/15.

No leadership without learning

At City of Glasgow College I want inspiration, excellence and innovation to be our new norm. I often say to my senior managers that their job is not to manage the inevitable, but to achieve the improbable. Our commitment to excellence extends beyond narrow frameworks for accountability. Together as a purposeful staff team – ‘Team City’ – we have taken a below average college and made it one of the highest ranking colleges in the Scottish sector for student attainment. Our Project Search training programme for young adults with learning challenges and/or autism helped 75 percent of participants to secure employment, with the remaining number taking part in a three-year support system with a job coach. We encourage our students to enter skills competitions such as WorldSkills to give them the best national and international benchmarks for their particular standard of technical or professional proficiency and we are now the number one college in the UK for WorldSkills and seek to be the best in Europe through the European Excellence Award.

We have certainly not allowed the traditionalists, the policy makers or ideologues, or our geography to determine our own or our students’ destiny. We have instead developed our skill of prescience and actively looked at what might happen in the future as a basis for creating our own opportunity. Since merger, the college has had glowing endorsement from a wide range of regulators and quality assessors. The most recent inspection report from Education Scotland highlights our positive corporate culture, our determined focus on student engagement and attainment and our excellent student support services.

Transformational change

Each of the three legacy colleges which merged to form City of Glasgow College served their students and Glasgow well for many years. But the reality facing us all is that the demands of students and lecturers alike in the 21st century have changed beyond all recognition since the 1960s, when these colleges with their 11 buildings across six sites first became part of the city landscape.

Mergers are very complex programmes of cultural change, far easier to conceive than they are to deliver. The grand plans hatched in boardrooms must ultimately win hearts and minds. Mergers are certainly not a one size fits all quick-fix solution, rather a best fit solution arrived at after weighing up present and future organisational challenges. Successful mergers require a compelling vision, exceptional leadership and infinite resilience.

Within a college context, if deciding whether merger or other significant structural changes are the best option, it is always essential to start with the students and have clearly defined and articulated educational benefits, otherwise don’t bother. The benefits and advances that students are seeing at City of Glasgow College could not have been realised by the legacy institutions remaining on their own or indeed in the buildings in which each was housed.

Our success was never inevitable, we worked extremely hard to make it happen. Firmly committed to the possibility of the college as a world-class institution in outlook, performance and approach, we dared to be different, we dared to lead, we dared to innovate to redefine, to be a catalyst for transformational rather than incremental change. We committed to being a beacon of technical and professional excellence for the UK and beyond. All are welcome to visit our next generation college to experience the new

possible, for what we have achieved collectively is not just for us, for Glasgow or even for Scotland. We want others in the rest of the UK to realise their own new possibilities.

“... It’s a sort of splendid torch I have hold of for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.” **George Bernard Shaw**