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Localism: Emerging Issues and Challenges for Leaders in the Further Education System

January 2016

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Funded by
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FETL is an independent charity and think - tank, which is working to strengthen the leadership of thinking in FE & Skills. For too long the sector has been under-researched, under-conceptualised, under-theorised and under-understood.

FETL was conceived to offer to sector colleagues the opportunity to spend time thinking, on behalf of us all, about the topical concerns of leadership in today's complex education and training system and to do so in order to advance knowledge for the sector's future.

Introduction

The purpose of this interim paper is to report the early issues that have emerged from our FETL-funded research on the implications of localism for further education (FE). Through the interviews and focus groups that form this project, we have engaged with a substantial number of college managers and governors across England thus far, and a range of topics, themes and concerns have emerged from those discussions.

It is widely acknowledged across the system that the current policy 'busyness' – in particular that generated by Area Reviews – may obscure or crowd out the time, 'space' and perception of the need for a longer-term exercise to envision what the future purpose(s) and shape(s) of the FE system could be. As one research participant observed, the 'Game of Thrones excitement' of the Area Review process runs the risk of obscuring the bigger issues that lie behind it. Colleges are so busy with the 'now' that there is a danger that consideration of the future is neglected.

FE principals, senior management teams, boards of governors, and colleges' many stakeholders need to grapple with the immediate demands for a more financially secure and stable pattern of provision (nationally and locally); however, there is an urgent need to develop a compelling longer-term vision for the system and each college's place within it, and to 'sell' this to both local and national policymakers. In the absence of such a vision, the danger is that we will end up at the end of the localisation process with 'less of the same'.

In a paper of this length it is not possible to deal with every issue that has been uncovered, or even to deal with those that are discussed in great detail. The aim is to flag up topics that we expect the research to delve into further, and to alert those with an interest in the FE system to the most salient challenges that the localism and devolution agenda is throwing up. Much of what follows is concerned with the shape and direction that the localisation of skills policy is taking, as this forms the context within which colleges and their leadership teams can exercise judgement, form views about future possibilities, and shape thinking and events.

Trust and 'metis' – two 'golden threads'?

In conceptualising how best to approach a move towards a more localised FE system that enables colleges to thrive, two interconnected concepts have formed the starting point for our work on this project. These are trust and 'metis'.

Trust requires limited explanation. Research suggests that the most effective national education and training (E&T) systems tend to possess and engender relatively high levels of trust between the different actors and stakeholders. This enables those at the centre to devolve responsibility and to afford delivery agents and front line staff higher degrees of discretion. Unfortunately, the FE and wider skills system that has evolved in England over the last 30 years is based on a model that saw the centre (national government and its agencies) increasingly adopt a low-trust attitude towards providers and those that represented them (Keep, 2009). Driven by New Public Management (NPM) theories, the system is configured in ways that stress competition rather than collaboration; marketisation within the context of detailed central auditing and control of funding streams; and high stakes inspection and performance management systems (PMS) – or what one proponent of such models termed

“targets and terror” (Propper, 2010: 34). In part, this lack of trust stemmed from a strand of economic thinking (principal/agent theory) which stresses the danger that the right kind or quality of learning, as defined and desired by the principal (central government), will not be delivered without strong incentives and monitoring systems agents (in this instance, learning providers). It also reflects an inherent belief that the centre (ministers and civil servants) always knows best, both in terms of what is required and how to deliver it most effectively.

This observation brings us to the concept of ‘metis’. The idea of metis (derived from the ancient Greek term for knowledge that can only be obtained from practical experience) was developed by the American agrarian researcher James C. Scott. He wanted to understand why so many state-led large-scale agrarian reforms, such as the Soviet Union’s attempts to collectivise farming, did not deliver the intended outcomes. His research led him to conclude that the primary reason was the failure of central planners and reformers to accept and acknowledge the vital importance of local knowledge and expertise (metis), and to trust subordinate actors to use this knowledge to improvise at local levels. Instead, they relied upon an essentially misplaced belief that the centre knows best and can therefore impose a ‘rational’ modernist order upon complex and varied local activities and conditions (see Scott, 1998, for further details).

English/UK government skills policy over recent decades has seen a decline in the acceptance that metis matters, leading to a decrease in its development and exercise, and a steady accumulation of power and control at central government and national agency level. In other words, the scope for local discretion and policy design has decreased. Successive waves of ‘reform’ transferred decision-making to the centre, in what one set of academic commentators (Bash and Coulby, 1989) termed a process of delocalisation, centralisation and nationalisation. In FE, the high point of this model was under New Labour, where policy came to be dominated by national learning entitlements and the drive to meet a set of nationally imposed skills targets (see Keep, 2009).

The broader movement towards partial re-localisation of decision-making that started under the Coalition government was dependent, in part, on an implicit belief that centralisation and top-down control had gone too far. It was also based on the notion that, in some instances, local knowledge could deliver superior policies and outcomes that were better suited to prevailing local conditions than one-size-fits-all national programmes and policies. In other words, the development of the devolution policy agenda acknowledges that metis exists and needs to be given the space and freedom to be deployed. This will, in turn, result in improved social and economic outcomes in specific localities. The issue, as many respondents to our research have noted, then becomes how much space, for whom, and exercised at what levels and through which mechanisms? These are questions that will be returned to below.

Localism – what is really on offer?

The backdrop to the localisation of skills policy is formed by broader debates about what devolution actually means and its potential to deliver change. Skills issues represent just one facet of a much bigger package of political and administrative changes. As the first Research Paper produced for this project (Keep, 2015) argued, there are significant political and academic debates about the scale and importance of the powers that central government is now consenting to devolve to localities and local bodies. Many commentators have advanced the view that, at least to date, the rhetoric of localism and devolution has often tended to outrun the reality of the powers and resources that are actually being offered.

These issues matter because, in designing a more localised FE system that is intended to generate superior outcomes to the previously highly centralised model, there are two potential dangers: too much localisation leading to fragmentation and incoherence (system disintegration); or the retention of too much central control leading to an anaemic model of policy design and delivery at local levels, and the continued over-reliance on the centre to create and superintend reform.

How much power and opportunity for metis is on offer?

With regard to skills funding and policy, there are three reasons to question the intended re-balancing between national government and its agencies and localities. First, the initial stages of skills devolution have resulted in what are, at best, limited discretionary powers being afforded to localities (Gravatt, 2014; Clayton and McGough, 2015). The main changes have been a range of relatively limited opportunities to ‘flex’ national programmes and entitlement packages (negotiated as one-off deals between national government and individual localities), some powers to experiment with and pilot new forms of delivery, and often quite small amounts of public money to support these developments.

The promise that the adult skills budget will be fully devolved via local deals by 2018 means that bigger changes are on the way; however, the full scale of these are as yet unknown. There are at least three key issues:

1. Powers of funding

Will skills funding be ring-fenced when it is handed to localities, or will it be part of a larger general funding pot that local bodies can re-allocate as they see fit?

2. Powers of management control

Will local commissioning replicate the current low-trust, tightly controlled model as managed by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), or will localities opt for some kind of block grant model that allows colleges greater freedom to determine how resources should be allocated?

3. Powers of targets

How will the relationship between devolved funding to support locally-determined priorities and targets, and (unless they are abolished) the national statutory learning entitlements and national policy targets, be managed?

The second point is that while what remains of the adult skills budget is to be devolved from national to local level, government policy is simultaneously stressing two new funding models – the apprenticeship levy and student loans – neither of which are particularly amenable to local influence or control. The apprenticeship levy will be a UK-wide tax, controlled not by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), but by HM Treasury. It is unlikely that the Treasury would be willing to countenance geographically-based variations in its rate, and to attempt this would potentially be very complex. The money generated by the levy will go to neither the national SFA, nor to local bodies. Under the planned apprenticeship reforms (HM Government, 2015) all money will flow to individual employers, and colleges and other providers will only be able to directly access this cash via negotiations and agreement with these businesses. Funding therefore shifts from a national agency to individual firms. In the case of provision supported via student loans, funding ceases to flow through the SFA and is instead routed via individual students. In both cases funding is being ‘devolved’, but in neither case to the control of local bodies or colleges. Instead, the locus of decision-making becomes individual firms and prospective students.

The third point is that there are strongly contradictory tendencies at work within the broader E&T policy arena, whereby policy as it relates to schools and schooling is heading in the completely opposite direction to that for FE and skills. Schools and the schooling ‘system’ (a ‘system’ made up of parallel streams of different institutional forms – community schools, traditional church/faith schools, individual and grouped academies, free schools, studio schools, and University Technical Colleges) are continuing to experience a familiar process of delocalisation, centralisation and nationalisation. It is the government’s intention, as indicated by the Chancellor in his 2015 Autumn Statement, that the days of local authority control and influence over schooling should come to an end. The same is happening with children’s services, where the new policy model is one of detaching services from local authority control and then outsourcing them (Butler, 2015). The Prime Minister has hailed this development as, “one of the big landmark reforms of this parliament” (Butler, 2015).

Against this backdrop elsewhere in the E&T system, FE and skills funding and policy is, paradoxically, being handed back to local bodies (albeit not necessarily elected local authorities). This suggests that FE and skills policy is either based on wholly different underlying logics to schools, or that it is simply fundamentally incoherent (Keep, 2015: 12). In the absence of any explanation from government about why localisation works for FE and skills but nationalisation of schooling is needed, it is hard to know which potential reasoning applies.

An analysis of government policy statements on skills suggests there is an expectation that the centre will continue to drive strategic policy development without much prior consultation with other stakeholders (within FE and beyond). Furthermore, localities will see it as their role to deliver these priorities, using their new ‘freedoms’ to adapt national policy models and schemes of delivery to meet local circumstances. Whether this is the policy template that some City Deals and other local bodies aspire to or are working towards is an open question. Many among those pressing for devolution appear to want to acquire significantly greater influence over the overall development and direction of policy than is currently being offered by national government (a point that will be returned to below).

The important lesson to take from this is that for all the talk about the importance attached by

government to devolution, the concept is currently being conceived and it therefore has very clear limits. In addition, there are significant countervailing tendencies at work. As things stand, large elements of the E&T system are likely to be either controlled by central government or – in the case of higher education and increasing swathes of higher level FE – marketised via new loan arrangements. Even in policy areas where control of funding and delivery has been localised, the overall strategic direction of policy seems liable to be determined by national politicians and policymakers rather than at local level. This situation has major implications for the scale and the coherence of new models of local control, and will be the focus of the debates that colleges want to contribute to.

Localism and the potential for disintegration

The opposing argument, noted by some research respondents, is that devolution will reduce the overall coherence of the E&T system. As the project's first Research Paper (Keep, 2015) indicated, one of the central problems with localism under the current and previous governments has been the complete absence of any overall blueprint for the end point towards which the process is leading. At present, the model is that of one-off deals between individual localities and government. This process of differential devolution may make sense given localities' different capacities and starting points, but this does not necessarily mean that a fully mapped-out model is not required. The process of designing such a model would best be accomplished through co-creation between central government and local bodies, but there are as yet no signs of such a process being initiated.

In the absence of a clear sense of where we are heading, both in terms of devolution in general and the devolution of FE and skills, there is a risk that a patchwork quilt will emerge rather than a coherent national system. For example, it is doubtful whether the geography of learning (student travel to learn patterns) or the geography of earning (employee travel to work patterns) map with any precision on to the political geography of City Deal and Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) boundaries. Many within FE have raised this point in relation to Area Reviews, but it also applies more generally to the new set of funding boundaries that will emerge as the Adult Skills Budget is devolved to localities. Not only does this make the planning and matching of provision to demand (from either prospective students or employers) harder to achieve, but it is also likely that there will be different learning opportunities available depending on which side of the arbitrary administrative border you fall.

If localities decide to develop and adopt markedly different models for commissioning provision under the devolved Adult Skills Budget, colleges that deal with students from more than one locality, or who operate across political boundaries, may find themselves having to cope with multiple funding, audit and accountability systems. One existing City Deal contains provision for the creation of 15 new apprenticeship standards, designed solely by employers within the city region, which will be separate from the standards being developed nationally. It is debatable whether this Balkanisation of the vocational qualification system represents a sensible development; however, it may be a sign of things to come.

Given these issues, there is a need for colleges and others to think about enabling connectivity between different localities, and how the localities can work together within a national (albeit devolved) system. One approach is via shared accountability mechanisms and lines of reporting, and it is to these that we now turn.

Local and national accountability mechanisms

Respondents involved in the research are concerned that the future shape and functioning of governance and accountability mechanisms for the FE system, and its constituent parts, are lacking – and this urgently needs to be addressed. To date, neither national government nor bodies representing localities have offered much substance on this topic, yet it seems inevitable that a new, more formally-structured relationships between the national and the local, between different localities, and between providers and local policy, planning and funding bodies will have to be forged. The shape of this institutional architecture has yet to be determined, and at present it is far from apparent whose task it will be to initiate thinking on this topic.

Respondents raised a wide range of questions with regard to the creation of new mechanisms. Some of the most salient include:

1. Through what mechanisms, if any, will different localities liaise about their skills policies and to what degree will localities choose to confederate (regionally and/or nationally) to create forms of collective policy deliberation and representation?
2. Given the emerging answers to question one, how will the Department for Education (DfE) and BIS structure and manage their accountability relationship with localities (individually and collectively) and those that govern policy?
3. What will be the relationship between national targets, entitlements and priorities, and those set by localities, and how will tensions between these (not least for scarce public resources) be mediated?
4. To what extent, if any, will central government relinquish a share of influence over the fashioning of strategic skills policy goals, and, if it does, through what mechanisms will this 'dual-key' model of policy formulation be structured?
5. What issues and decisions are best made centrally, and which locally, and should some be shared (and if so, through what mechanisms)?

At present, as respondents noted, potential models of new local governance arrangements are available (see, for example, Hodgson and Spours, 2015). Some of the new mechanisms are being trialled, not least Local Outcome Agreements, but in the absence of any meaningful overall blueprint, and with varying understanding of what outcome agreements might mean, this development may not be enough to resolve the issue of how colleges relate with and are made accountable to their local funding body. This vacuum makes it extremely difficult for colleges and their boards – and the FE system more widely – to plan ahead, not least in terms of how they prepare for the devolution of what remains of the Adult Skills Budget.

The broader localism policy agenda – tensions between promise and reality?

Wider research on devolution and skills policy, as well as this project's interaction with practitioners, indicate that there are a number of tensions between the range and scale of expectations that are being loaded on to devolution and, in the short to medium-term at least, the likely economic and social outcomes that it may generate (see Keep, 2015, for a more detailed discussion).

For example, there is an official belief that devolution will aid in the spatial re-balancing of the economy, enabling more deprived localities to 'catch up' and close the gap with London and the South East. Many researchers and economic experts argue that this belief may be misplaced, and that even if correct in principle, devolution of the type and scale being attempted in England is liable to prove insufficient to deliver the desired outcomes. The danger of a mismatch between what is promised and what is subsequently delivered poses a distinct threat to the devolution movement, both at a general level and also in terms of FE and skills, where, despite reduced levels of resources, the expectation is that more and better outcomes will be generated.

At a different level, there is a tension between what devolved skills policy could potentially encompass, and what early indications suggest are the range of issues it will attempt to address. Although localism and devolution in the skills area can be portrayed as a radical change, this may only apply to the forms and levels through which policy is delivered rather than to changes in the essential substance of what policy aims to achieve and the means adopted to bring this about. Criticism of English/UK skills policy over the last 30 years (or more) has often focused on the extremely narrow way in which it has been framed. As the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2012) and others have underlined, skills policy (at national, regional or local levels) can and should encompass three, inter-connected elements:

1. Skills supply.
2. The effective usage of skills within the productive process and/or wider society.
3. The underlying level of demand for skills within the economy and labour market.

Unfortunately, as many have noted, English/UK government skills policy has tended to obsess about point one, assumed that the achievement of point two will take place more or less automatically, and has believed that point three is not a problem (or that if it is, it is an issue that policy cannot address) (Keep, 2002; Keep, Mayhew and Payne, 2006; Keep and Mayhew, 2010; Keep and Mayhew, 2014).

The danger is that localism as it is currently evolving will ultimately result in miniaturised versions of national government's traditional supply-led policy model. In other words, there will be an obsession with the volume of student flows and outputs; lots of targets for skills supply at different qualification levels, skill sets/subject areas, occupations and industries; and yet further attempts to improve the 'matching' of skills supply with demand. This is

notwithstanding the fact that in the past skills supply targets have often been in excess of the real underlying levels of demand within the economy (Keep, 2002; 2006). Any serious and sustained attempt to integrate economic development, business support and improvement, workplace development and skills supply that allows policy to confront and address issues concerning skill utilisation and the boosting of demand for skills within the economy will be missing – and these are the conditions that research suggests underpin economic success in other countries (Keep, Mayhew and Payne, 2006; Keep and Mayhew, 2014). Successive iterations of national supply-led skills strategies have failed to generate the intended step change in education and training or a move towards a high skill, high wage, and high productivity economy. Ultimately, what failed at national level is no more likely to generate radically different results at local level.

Other approaches do exist, however. For example, there is a model provided by a skills ecosystems approach (Eddington and Toner, 2012), which is based on a biological metaphor, and which is grounded in the feedback mechanisms that exist within and between the skills system and the labour market. This approach was extensively trialled in Australia. Closer to home, Scotland has made significant progress in developing a more integrated approach to linking skills supply and economic development activities at both national and local levels, and has also taken initial steps to address the issue of skills utilisation. Localities that want to change the nature of their local economy and boost wages and productivity, rather than simply meeting an arbitrary skills supply target, will need to explore new ways of framing and delivering skills policies that move beyond the comfort zone of yet another attempt to simply boost skills supply (Keep and Mayhew, 2014).

Localised policy formation and governance, and the issue of capacity development

Evidence from Scotland and the history of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) indicates that a move away from relatively simple supply-led policies – and towards a more sophisticated and integrated skills and economic development ‘offer’ – requires close partnerships between agencies who have a relatively sophisticated understanding of the firms and labour markets with which they are working. These agencies also need the capacity to fashion and then deliver integrated packages of training, business support and improvement, and workplace development (see Sung and Ashton, 2015). In other words, the process entails rather more than simply putting on another training course or delivering an increased number of student places.

In a similar vein, there is a significant amount of work to be undertaken to develop local representatives and staff who can deliver a localities system that can:

- Represent local views and those of front-line staff and learning providers in a two-way exchange with national government.
- Play an active role in policy formation.
- Concert action across administrative and funding boundaries.

There is a need for a major staff and organisational development exercise aimed at staff and governors in colleges, LEPs, and Combined Authorities, including their economic development functions. It is doubtful if existing agencies and provision can easily fill this gap.

Final thoughts

This report has raised a number of issues about how best to design and deliver the localisation of skills policy, and about the implications that may flow from the changes currently being wrought in our skills system. A key question remains around who holds responsibility for noting and addressing these challenges. The answer to this is far from clear.

At present, much of BIS's attention seems to be focused on the high profile, high stakes arena of apprenticeship funding and reform, and, to a lesser extent, on professional and technical education at Levels 3 and above, rather than on the overarching reform of 19+ skills provision. What has so far been entirely absent is any attempt (at least insofar as what is publicly available is concerned) to sketch out what the future shape, structure, and lines of accountability (national to local and vice versa) will take once the devolution of skills policy reaches some stage of maturity. It does not seem unreasonable to pose the question to government: 'what is your vision of the skills system in 2020?' Such a vision (albeit rather blurry round the edges) has been produced for the apprenticeship system (HM Government, 2015), but nothing has yet been undertaken for the broader skills system.

This is not to suggest that all of the answers should come from government – far from it. If localism is to deliver superior results to those generated by the old, top-down, centralised skills system, then it is imperative that the design 'architecture' and operating model(s) for the revised system are thought through and negotiated by the various stakeholders. The problem is that, at present, a patchwork quilt of one-off deals is emerging, and it is uncertain what these will add up to in terms of a new system architecture, or whether and how the whole (i.e. the new system) will be greater than the sum of its diverse parts (i.e. the local deals). Given that central government is in control of the process (inasmuch as it decides which elements of any proposed deal to grant or decline), it would be helpful for them to present a coherent statement on the long-term strategic goals and guiding principles of the exercise, not least in order to provide something concrete that other stakeholders in the FE and skills policy arena could respond to. If devolution is a journey, it is quite important to know where it is supposed to be leading and to possess a route map in order to ensure that we eventually get there.

In essence, there are two inter-linked sets of problems:

1. A lack of an accepted and agreed vision of the desired outcomes for the localisation of different aspects of skills policy and delivery, what new structural arrangements for policy formation, accountability and monitoring it is expected to lead to, and what impact this policy change is likely to have.
2. A set of process issues about who is meant to be doing what, particularly in terms of developing the capacity to make the emerging system work effectively, and the new balance of responsibilities and roles.

In arriving at answers to these questions, the voices of those within the FE system need to be clearly heard. One of the drivers of localism has been a desire to empower colleges and afford those who work in colleges a greater say over what happens to our skills system. As

the project's earlier Research Paper sought to argue, there are many competing visions of what localism and devolution can and should seek to be and to deliver, and some of these are potentially more desirable avenues to explore than are others. Unless FE and its leaders can influence thinking, there is a considerable danger that someone else will create a vision for the system and we will end up with miniaturised, less well-funded versions of existing skills policy.

In his presidential address to the AoC National Conference in 2015, John Widdowson argued that those working in FE needed to work out, "what sort of FE sector we want to see"; the Chair of the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL), Jill Westerman, has argued that we, "need to be creating our own future". This suggests that colleges, individually and collectively, will have to make the space and time to create a long-term model for how FE and skills policy should evolve, and how localism can support new forms of accountability and a stronger partnership model of policy formation with central government. Colleges will then need to go out and further develop and sell these ideas to other stakeholders.

Without the development of this overarching vision of shape, purposes and functioning of the skills system, many of the second tier questions and issues that respondents to this research project have flagged up will be hard to address. These questions include:

1. How to design and secure better systems of information, advice and guidance (IAG).
2. How to avoid localised payment-by-results systems.
3. How to be afforded greater freedom to take the initiative.
4. How to minimise wasteful duplication and competition.
5. How to join up skills and employment policies.
6. How to avoid having to work to arbitrary targets.
7. How to move to a more appropriate model of inspection system.

This is because the answers to the top-level questions, which will determine the context in which these developments might take place, will be lacking.

Until some of the broader issues raised here have been acknowledged and resolved, it is difficult to arrive at any hard and fast judgement on exactly what skills and leadership qualities would best be suited to enable colleges to thrive in the new system. For example, if localism is going to lead to smaller, leaner versions of what we had in the recent past, then the key leadership skills required are liable to be largely about entrepreneurship, reacting to short-term incentive structures or shaping them to institutional advantage, identifying secure revenue streams and types of students, and reducing risk. On the other hand, if the new model leads to a more integrated and collaborative structure where skills is part of a set of broader economic and social policy strategies within the contexts set by local economies and labour markets, then partnership and networking skills; the ability to integrate different policy concepts and streams; to blend learning within other forms of activity; and to help design and manage the delivery of more bespoke training, means that business and innovation support interventions become important. Networked forms of inter-organisational collaboration require new skill sets (see Keast et al, 2004).

The next stage of our project will drill down further on the aspirations of leaders in the FE system. We will be developing and deploying scenarios that offer different visions for the FE system under localisation, and the aim is to use these to clarify options and preferences for policy development. Hopefully, as we undertake this, the broader policy environment will start to offer up some answers to the many questions posed here about the future shape of devolution.

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