

The perception and implementation of sustainable Leadership strategies in further education colleges

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Abstract

Sustainable leadership as a concept is both in its infancy and also under researched, with much of the previous work in the area concentrating solely on the compulsory sector. Lambert (2011) argues that existing models are not entirely appropriate for further education due to the landscape in which colleges operate. This paper presents the findings of empirical work which sought the views of principals of general further education colleges (equivalent to United States Community Colleges) in the south east of England and London, UK, as to whether they are in agreement with the component aspects of the framework of sustainable leadership for further education colleges suggested by Lambert (2011).

Introduction

This paper describes research on whether a newly developed framework of sustainable leadership (Lambert, 2011) could be used by further education colleges (equivalent to United States Community Colleges) and if the proposed elements are already being implemented by those colleges participating in this study; particularly as a framework for developing individuals' capability in order that they can pursue senior leadership posts. This research is set against a backdrop of a number of reports (Fearson, 2003; Clancy 2005; Centre for Excellence in Leadership, 2005; Colinson & Colinson, 2005) which have noted a continued shortage of suitably skilled individuals to take on senior leadership posts, particularly principalship within further education colleges. The increasing shortage of suitable applicants poses a significant risk to colleges, when recruiting new principals, with decisions being made by recruitment panels whether to appoint the best candidate for the post or the best candidate on the day. Pessimists might suggest that there is a false economy in developing individuals' capacity to

secure senior posts as this would make it difficult to retain good leaders within colleges, but Smylie et al. (2005) argue that the only way to improve colleges and attract staff is to provide leadership development opportunities.

The paper will reflect upon the extent to which college principals are in agreement with the concept of sustainable leadership and whether the framework for sustainable leadership for further education colleges proposed in Lambert (2011) could be used as a tool for developing the capacity of the organization, and for the development of future college leaders. The article is based upon a sample of 65 general further education college principals who were invited to complete a questionnaire, in the autumn of 2010, which sought to gain an understanding of the extent to which components of the sustainable leadership framework proposed are supported and whether the component elements are implemented.

What is sustainable leadership?

The concept of sustainable leadership is in its infancy, with literature on the subject dating back to 2003. All of the currently available literature focuses solely on the compulsory sector (Elementary and High School) and has not been applied to the further education sector. However, the concepts explored in subsequent sections will establish whether the ideas are transferable from the compulsory sector to the post-compulsory (Community College) sector either in their entirety or in part. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) acknowledge that education, specifically in the compulsory sector, is failing to attract quality leaders. They suggest that this is due to increases in job stress, continuing reductions in school funding and an increasingly diverse student population. Magnus (2009) suggests that these factors have been exacerbated by an aging population contributing to the shortage of suitably experienced leaders who have the skills necessary to take on senior leadership posts. In order to counter some of these challenges Hargreaves and Fink (2006) devised a model of sustainable leadership as a tool for developing leadership capacity within organizations. They argue that an organizational approach to leadership development provides good value for money. They also warn that sustainable leadership does not provide short-term quick fixes, but will set a long-term trajectory for the organization so that it will continue regardless of who is occupying the principal or headteacher position. They claim that this will have two positive benefits, firstly career progression through the development of individuals to ensure they have the necessary skills for senior leadership and secondly the maintenance of organizational sustainability and stability. In order to develop sustainable organizations Hargreaves and Fink put forward a seven principle model. Table 1 summarises the elements of this model and the key ideas supporting them.

Table 1. Component parts of Hargreaves and Fink (2006) seven principle model

Principle	Name	Summary
1	Depth	Leadership for learning and caring for others. Deep learning, not superficial testing and narrowly defined achievements.
2	Length	It preserves and advances the most valuable aspects of life over time, from one leader to the next.
3	Breadth	It develops and depends on the leadership of others, not just one person at the top.
4	Justice	It does not steal the best students/teachers from surrounding institutions; it does not prosper at the expense of other institutions. It collaborates.
5	Diversity	Learn from diversity, creating social inclusion and cohesion.
6	Resourcefulness	Recognize, reward and develop talent from early on in an individual's career.
7	Conservation	Honor and learn from the past to create a better future.

Hargreaves and Fink's (2006) work has been the basis for a number of subsequent models such as Hill (2006), Davies (2009) and Hargreaves (2009).

Through examining existing models it appears that elements are independent of the phase of education (primary, secondary, post-compulsory). For example, the need to balance short term objectives with long term goals (Davies, 2009) and the dual commitment to both short term and long term objectives is common to most education sectors (Fullen, 2005). Davies' (2009) argues that due to the relentless onset of initiatives principals of schools will make decisions as to what initiatives to pursue – strategic abandonment. Unlike schools who average approximately 97.4 full time equivalent (FTE) staff per secondary school (High School equivalent) and 23.9 FTE per primary (Elementary) school (DfE, 2010), further education colleges have potentially a greater number of staff with the average college typically having 2595 staff (Skills Funding Agency, 2010) in which initiatives can be distributed allowing staff greater opportunities to engage in projects that will have a positive benefit to the organization. As a result of increasing the number of individuals involved in projects and initiatives a positive consequence is the development of capacity within the colleges to deal with change. This is not to say that principals do not strategically abandon initiatives merely that with a greater pool of staff the level of abandonment are potentially less than in schools. Robson (1998) suggests that the levels of initiatives are in

part a result of the rise of managerialism and this has caused tension between teaching staff and managers, as discussed in Elliott (1996). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) in their model of sustainable leadership suggest that one of the elements is justice – where schools and colleges will not compete for students from neighbouring institutions. In the compulsory sector schools have defined catchment areas and recruitment is managed at a local authority (district) level; however, with the increase in academies that have control over their admissions procedures, this becomes more aligned to colleges which recruit from many different areas depending on the curriculum the college offers. Therefore it would be difficult to justify this element in a sustainable leadership framework for further education colleges, and with recent changes in government policy it is becoming increasingly obsolete within schools. Consolidates is the notion that institutions work collaboratively in order to provide the appropriate curriculum necessary for the local economy. This was a theme of the Labour government's 14-19 Diplomas which required schools and colleges to work together to deliver these qualifications. However, the coalition government abandoned the 14-19 entitlement, thus removing this requirement (Gibb, 2010). However, Wolf's (2011) review of vocational education does reinforce the positive benefits of collaboration over competition. As a result of Lambert's (2011) work examining existing models of sustainable leadership a specific framework for sustainable leadership for post-compulsory education was suggested, and it is this framework which is the basis of this research. This paper takes the framework and seek the views of principals in further education colleges about whether the component elements are appropriate as part of a tool which supports organizational leadership development. The paper also seeks to indentify through the use of a Likert scale the extent to which the components of the framework are currently implemented. Table 2 provides a summary of the framework for sustainable leadership in post-compulsory education.

Table 2. Components of Lambert (2011) sustainable leadership framework

Principle	Name	Summary
1	Builds capacity of staff	Develops opportunities for staff to develop their capacity and best practice in leadership and management.
2	Strategic Distribution	It empowers individuals at all levels of the organization to engage in leadership activities which bring about sustainable improvement.
3	Consolidates	It seeks to work collaboratively to ensure that the learning available meets the needs of the locality.
4	Builds long-term objective from short-term goals	Creates synergy between the long-term objectives of the organization and the short-term targets imposed by funding agencies.
5	Diversity	Learn from diversity, creating social inclusion and cohesion.
6	Conserves	Honor and learn from the past to create a better future.

The preceding section of the paper has provided a general introduction to the idea of sustainable leadership as a tool for developing organizational capacity. It outlined Hargreaves and Fink's (2006) model of sustainable leadership which formed the basis for subsequent models and Lambert's (2011) framework of sustainable leadership was proposed as a more appropriate model for the further education sector. This model was used in the fieldwork to determine both its validity and also to ascertain whether such a tool will aid colleges in developing organizational leadership capacity and to what extent the component elements are currently implemented.

Methodology

The research reported here is from questionnaires sent out to principals of general further education colleges in the South East of England and London. General further education colleges provided a sample both large enough to base some preliminary conclusions on, and small enough to make the sample manageable within the resources available. Prior to inviting principals to participate in the questionnaire a pilot process was conducted, in line with advice from Oppenheim (1992) and McNeill and Chapman (2005). Of the sample of 65 college principals 19 returned the questionnaire, a 29.23% response. The rate was below Cohen et al. (2003) expectations of a 40% response rate for postal questionnaires. In

Edwards et al.'s (2002) analysis of 292 studies using postal questionnaires they identified measures which would increase the response rate. These included monetary incentives, using a short questionnaire, personalized letters to recipients, stamped return envelopes, and providing a second copy when following up non-respondents. With the exception of a monetary incentive all of these were followed which did not significantly increase the return rate. As the questionnaires were returned they were logged and non-respondents were contacted to remind them about participating in this study. Of those who did not respond to the questionnaire five (7.6%) did respond via their Personal Assistants stating that it was their policy not to participate in questionnaires, surveys or research in any form, or that they were extremely busy and therefore could not afford the time to complete the questionnaire. One of the issues with having only 19 responses from the 65 participants is whether these 19 form a representative sample. With a confidence interval of 20 and a population of 65, 18 responses would be required; however, given the size of the confidence interval, it is questionable whether the findings of those who responded represent the population sampled and less so all further education college principals, which has to be acknowledged as a limitation of this research. While, as the following section will illustrate that among the responses received there is a huge level of agreement around the aspects of the sustainable leadership framework, further work needs to be undertaken with a wider sample to ensure that the findings are representative of all college principals.

Findings

Perceptions of Sustainable Leadership

This section of the paper presents that data and discusses the results under each of the sustainable leadership headings proposed in table two. Of the responses received 21.4% were from colleges with an income of less than £14m, with 57.1% from institutions with an income of between £14m and £29m, and 21.4% from colleges with an income in excess of £29m. Colleges were categorised as, small, medium, or large institutions, based on income whereby Payne (2008) suggests that there is a direct correlation between student population and levels of income generated. Table 3 identifies the respondents' response to each of the principles identified in Lambert's (2011) framework of sustainable leadership. The first set of figures illustrate the responses to the question about the extent to which the principal agrees with the aspect of the framework, the second figure, in italics, the extent to which the principal's college is actively implementing that particular aspect of the framework.

Table 3 illustrates that there is overwhelming support for the elements of the sustainable leadership framework proposed. As part of the questionnaire

participants were given the opportunity to suggest additional elements which they felt should be included in the framework; however, none did. What was highlighted was that a number of respondents indicated that they *agree* rather than *strongly agree* with the elements presented. Oppenheim (1992) suggests that this could be due to a lack of understanding towards to the subject, but goes on to argue that using *agree* and *strongly agree* provides more precise information about a respondents degree of agreement or disagreement. The findings suggest that there is further work to be done, particularly in articulating the meaning of the individual elements in order that those participants who selected *agree* from the Likert scale fully understand the framework.

Table 3. Results from the questionnaires

Name	Summary	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1 Builds capacity of staff	My organisation provides opportunities and motivates staff to develop their skills in leadership and management. This could be through formal training, work shadowing, mentoring or any other appropriate structured approach.	50% 36%	50% 64%	0% 0%	0% 0%
2 Strategic Distribution	My organisation enables individuals at all levels of the organisation to engage in leadership activities which bring about sustainable improvement through the distribution of strategic initiatives. This might be through leadership of whole college projects which bring about change.	42.9% 15%	50% 64%	7.1% 21%	0% 0%
3 Consolidates	My organisation seeks to enable and foster opportunities to work collaboratively and develop partnerships, ensuring that the learning available meets the needs of the locality. This might be through staff working with 14-19 partnerships or curriculum collaboration with schools and other learning providers.	85.7% 57%	14.3% 43%	0% 0%	0% 0%
4 Builds long-term objective from short-term goals	My organisation enables all staff to contribute to creating synergy between the long-term objectives of the organisation and the short-term targets imposed by funding agencies. This could be achieved through staff working on departmental business or service plans	28.6% 15%	71.4% 78%	0% 7%	0% 0%
5 Diversity	My organisation enables social inclusion and cohesion to be created. This is done through engaging with stakeholders to promote inclusion of under represented groups participating at the college.	71.4% 36%	28.6% 64%	0% 0%	0% 0%
6 Conserves	My organisation enables managers and leaders to honour and learn from the past to create a better future.	28.6% 29%	71.4% 64%	0% 7%	0% 0%

The responses to the questionnaire illustrate that there is support, in principle, for a framework of sustainable leadership for further education colleges, but it is unclear why principals are supportive of the elements proposed. It could be argued that it's not a case of being supportive, rather a matter of compliance, in

that there is a requirement imposed by external agencies such as Ofsted to undertake a specific activity, such as ensuring the institution is socially inclusive. However, responses made were based on the principal's judgments and knowledge of their institution and on the assurance of anonymity.

The following section of this paper addresses, in turn, each aspect of the framework and considers the responses obtained from the questionnaire.

Builds Capacity of Staff

The respondents were clear that it is important to develop individuals, 50% strongly agreed and 50% agreed with the concept of capacity building. Although the balanced shifted when asked about the extent to which this was actually done, with 37.5% strongly agreeing and 64.3% agreeing that it was carried out within their colleges. Only 14.3% of respondents felt that formal management training was fundamental to this process of developing individuals, with the others citing experience, learning on the job, and exposure to different situations was more important. Individuals did comment on the adverse cost of sending staff offsite to train, not only the direct cost but also the indirect costs associated with staff cover and travel expenses. These figures differ from the pattern of engagement reported in LSIS (2008) of institutions participating in management training offered by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership since its inception in 2003 until September 2008 where training had been delivered to 171 general further education colleges, representing 44% of all colleges nationally. It could be argued that changes in the perception of training, particularly cost, is a result of the current economic climate and the pressures on institutions to make efficiency gains following announcements made in the comprehensive spending review on funding for further education (Treasury, 2010). Should a program of development be put in place for individuals, then no aspect such as formal training, work-shadowing, or project work can be carried out in isolation and individual need to have the space and resources to enact the newly acquired skills if they are to be of lasting benefit to the organization. Kambil (2010) argues that both the college and individuals embarking on a program of development need to take the responsibility, with aspiring leaders ensuring that they cultivate the traits and skills necessary to pursue senior leadership positions. The current generation of leaders also have a moral responsibility to assist and support the next generation in their pursuit of senior leadership positions. Kambil (2010) goes on to suggest that this needs to go further than allowing space, time and mentorship moving to a sponsorship role by current senior leaders who are actively supporting aspiring leaders, encouraging participation in projects, and activities outside of their own areas of responsibility in order to develop the skills necessary for them to fulfil their potential as leaders in the future. All the principals who returned the questionnaire commented that

they felt they were obliged to develop their deputies in order that they could become future principals.

Strategic Distribution

In order that aspiring leaders are empowered and engaged in the strategic planning process it is important that power and decision making is not confined to the small group of senior managers. A majority of respondents agreed that this is a good idea, as Table two illustrates, 42.9% strongly agree and 50% agree. There was a minority who did not agree, 7.1%, and they stated that decision making should be confined to the senior leadership team, although Harris (2004) advocates the positive benefits of teacher involvement in leadership leading to sustained organizational improvement as a result of using distributed leadership. While it is not clear from the responses why principals responding in this way believed decision making should be confined to the senior leadership team; cross referencing the demographic data obtained suggests that these principals were of an age where of retirement age, and so could be inferred that there approach to educational leadership was somewhat traditional. When asked to what extent individuals at all levels of management were involved in decision making, there was a clear shift between the agreement of the principle and the extent to which it is being implemented, with only 14.3% strongly agreeing that their college does this, with 64.3% agreeing it happens, and 21.4%, nearly a quarter, saying they disagree with the statement and that this does not happen in their college. If a majority of principals agree that this should be happening as it can bring about positive developments for both individuals and the wider organization. The challenge there is how to enable this to happen particularly when as Wallace (1992) states most innovations are introduced and driven from the top of the organization. Respondents have already stated that future principals should gain more exposure and experience of managing projects, possibly through cross college projects linked to areas of organization development. A central theme of the leadership development programs offered by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership, prior to its merger with the Quality Improvement Agency (CEL, 2004), was the requirement that participants work on institutional projects which brought about change, and which had the sponsorship of a senior manager to ensure that the change was enabled. It is worthwhile remembering that Hall and Taylor (1996) state that there is a direct relationship between institutions and behaviour which explains why the majority of institutions continue to exist when the landscape in which they operate continues to change. Richardson (2010) notes that as the operating landscape changes some colleges might be forced to close or merge, although Skodin (1999) and Salane (2006) point out that merger is rarely a solution for a struggling organization.

Consolidates

Working in partnership has been a key theme for colleges over the past five years intensified by the introduction of the 14-19 White Paper (DfES, 2005). Gone are the days when colleges and school sixth forms were in direct competition with each other (Adnett & Davies, 2005), and into a period of time where providers of education and training in the post-compulsory sector are now working collaboratively together. The Labour government actively encouraged collaborative working through the introduction of the Diploma curriculum which forced schools and colleges to work together. While the incoming Conservative led coalition government removed the mandatory entitlement for diplomas to be available in all local authority areas (Gibb, 2010), Wolf (2011) continues to emphasise the need to collaborate in order to deliver an appropriate curriculum. Despite the emphasis on collaboration (DfES, 2005), Adnett and Davies (2005), Wolf (2010)) post-16 education providers which include further education college, school sixth forms and work based learning providers operate in a market driven system whereby learners will choose the provision and provider who best suits their individual needs. So there will always been a level of competition amongst the aforementioned providers, coupled with a funding system which incentivises providers to over recruit against their funding target. So while the ideology might be for a collaborative approach to education and training, the reality is somewhat different. Of those respondents 85.7% strongly agree and 14.3% agree that collaborations play a strong part in delivering a curriculum which meets the needs of young people and the local economy; however, only 57.1% strongly agree and 42.9% agree that their institution fosters opportunities to work collaboratively with other organizations. One of the main forums for this to happen is the local education authorities (District)14-19 strategic partnership, which serves as an ideal training ground for individuals wishing to gain exposure to the development of strategic collaboration; however, representation on these groups is often limited to the principal or their deputy. This offers little opportunity for others, even those already in the senior leadership positions to develop the skills and gain the exposure that current principals ay are key attributes that future principals should have.

Builds Long-Term Objectives from Short-Term Goals

The idea of ownership of objectives and targets is not new, and while academic writers such as Wolf (2004) and Ashton and Green (1996) argue about the value of targets particularly as an external measure of institutional performance. Jones and Sparks (1996) advocate the value of short term planning at departmental level which, is more about organizational development than external inspection and monitoring and when aggregated together with the other institutional plans will lead to longer term organizational gains. Jones and Sparks (1996) believe there is

a clear link for organizations between short- and long-term planning, which links into Lambert's (2011) framework and the idea of building long-term objectives from short-term goals as the driver for institutional development. For example, where the institution is perceived to be, and where does it aspire to get to. Only once this is fully understood by everybody can a process of planning start with individuals reflecting on their own work and asking themselves how they contribution to this plan. Lumby (1997) suggests that unless a senior manager was present, staff would probably disclaim all knowledge of the strategic plan let alone being part of it, but goes on the note that people must be part of that planning process in order to motivate staff and to get the organization moving in the same direction. Of the principals who responded 28.6% strongly agree and 71.4% agree that engaging staff in the strategic planning process is an important aspect of the work of the college, particularly acknowledging the contribution others can make demonstrates that the opinions of all individuals within the organization are valued. The extent to which this happens currently varies, with 14.3% of principals strongly agreeing that it does, 78.6% agreeing and 7.1% saying that currently it does not. But the question remains, to what extent are all staff involved in this process? Principals said in response to the questionnaire that staff, particularly those wishing to pursue senior leadership positions, should be involved in the strategic planning process, if that is the view coming from the respondents, then they must enable this to happen.

Diversity

Social inclusion is challenging at the best of times: that is the view of the Social Inclusion Unit (2001). Some colleges are more inclusive than others as the population from which they recruit is more culturally diverse and the curriculum they offer is accessible to different socio-economic groups making for a socially inclusive organization. Vasagar (2010) notes at the same time that approximately 170,000 students failing to gain a place in higher education in 2010-2011, despite achieving the necessary grades, which was the result of the government imposed cap on student places (Newman, 2010). This puts colleges in a difficult position where, in the pursuit of higher success rates with its direct link to funding, do they re-enroll some of the 170,000 who have already achieved the necessary qualifications for entry into higher education, and therefore are a lower risk to an institutions success rate, at the expense of other groups of students who would be potentially displaced from attending college places. Whilst respondents agreed that colleges should be socially inclusive, 71.4% strongly agreeing, and 28.6% agreeing, there was a shift when asked about the extent to which this happens, with 37.5% strongly agreeing and 64.3% agreeing. What is unclear is whether this is a result of centralized funding methodology which is results driven (Linford, 2009) or underrepresentation of specific socio-economic groups within a geographical area. This is only one aspect of diversity; the other is whether

embracing diversity supports sustainable leadership. Davies (2007) advocates not only embracing the diversity of the student cohort but also that of the staff as a mechanism by which institutions can retain their focus, direction and cohesion in an effort to improve. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) provide a more detailed perspective suggesting that leaders who embrace diversity avoid standardization of policy, curriculum and assessment, and staff development. This promotes that idea that in a culturally diverse society leaders should embrace the values of all individuals in which they engage with, which subsequently creates organizations which are both flexible and resilient when faced with change. It is these two elements of diversity which must be embraced if institutions are to embrace sustainable leadership as mechanization for developing future leaders and organizational capacity.

Conserves

Understanding the past is important in order to understand the present or the future. That is the view of Stainton-Rogers (2006) and Ho (1994), both of whom consider this in an epistemological context. However, Bell (1996) uses the notion of learning from the past in a research setting, using the ideas of action research, where systems or processes are revised based on what has happened. It is no different in a college environment, where the individuals within the organization can learn from what has happened in the past, refining where necessary to ensure that it is fit for purpose going forward. The view of the respondents was that 28.6% strongly agreed and 71.4% agreed with this aspect of the framework. 7.1% did not agree that it has happening in their institution, and while there was no specific reason provided as to why respondents felt this did not happen in their organization, it is unclear how they can face any challenges presented to them if they do not have an appreciation of what has gone before. Hargreaves and Fink (2006), Davies (2007, 2009) and Fink (2010) all agree that the ability to learn from the past is an important characteristic to have within the education sector and it forms the basis of continuous improvement. Therefore, it seems appropriate and reassuring that respondents also believe that this is an important trait to have.

Limitations of the Research

One of the main limitations and subsequently a recommendation arising from this research would be the relatively low responses rate to the questionnaire. Given the 29.3% return this is below the levels suggested by Robson (2002), despite implementing the recommendations from Edwards et al. (2002). Acknowledging the level of responses, the findings do provide a basis for further work which can be undertaken with a wider range of participants.

Conclusions

What this paper has attempted is to ascertain the views of principals of general further education colleges, by inviting participants to select from a Likert scale their level of agreement on each of the component aspects of the theoretical framework proposed by Lambert (2011). The author acknowledges the limited sample size and therefore the difficulties in making generalisations outside of the sample due to the geographical limitations and the response rates. What can be stated is that of those who responded, there was broad agreement around the aspects of the framework for sustainable leadership for further education, although further work is needed concerning the articulation of each of the component elements. The area of sustainable leadership in further education is under researched and this paper builds on the limited existing work and proposes further work be undertaken with a wider sample to determine whether this framework could be used by the further education sector in order to develop organizational capacity.

It needs to be borne in mind is that there is no one activity that will improve organizational leadership or develop a sustainable future for further education colleges. Each of the aspects, which participants responded against in the framework, should have an action plan which bring about change, with the framework being the central hub in this arrangement. This paper is not suggesting that colleges are not undertaking activities which will support individuals in the pursuit senior level appointments within colleges, as well as organizational improvement, more that there is a lack of synergy between the various activities. Therefore, a recommendation of this paper is that further work be undertaken to develop a toolkit so that individuals wishing to implement a framework of sustainable leadership have some example activities or case studies. These examples could be used to stimulate thinking around the actions which individual institutions need to take in order to maximize the benefits of the framework. Finally, the author would welcome feedback from researchers in the field of educational middle management and the transitions between middle and senior leadership in Further Education, as well as practitioners from the Further Education sector and would be particularly interested in comments on the proposed investigation.

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