

Time that tested my limited view of an FE college

IN 2002 I took up the post of chief executive and principal of North Tyneside Further Education (FE) College.

Having worked primarily in schools and local authorities this was a totally new ball game to me. At my first meeting with the staff I gave them a great deal of confidence by saying I could not even spell FE.

Ten years earlier FE colleges had been shifted out from under the control of local education authorities.

The policy framework for the incorporation of colleges envisaged these institutions, free of their local authorities, actively competing for students and for training and upskilling business contracts.

At the same time the colleges were being closely monitored to ensure they achieved audit targets and performance standards set for the whole sector by central government. Thus, the overall mission and direction for the college sector was determined centrally rather than at a local level.

Within a decade of my time at the college exactly the same process was being replicated with academies.

My limited view of an FE college was soon to be severely tested. First of all, I had the privilege of working with some of the most creative and progressive educationalists you could ever meet.

Secondly, the college had a certainty that their job was to be absolutely inclusive and provide a 'second chance' for young people.

Thirdly, the college did things I never expected.

Their emphasis on the student as a customer with sophisticated feedback mechanisms was superb. Their ability to work collaboratively with business was so impressive.

Finally, their curriculum was incredible, ranging across higher degrees in law, performing arts, engineering ... I could go on.

There was one problem. Whilst the college had been described as 'satisfactory' by Ofsted, one of the faculties had just failed Ofsted and the academic sixth form required significant development.

The first thing we did was to address the Ofsted concerns regarding the faculty. This was sorted within three months

At the same



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time Tynemouth Sixth Form College had just been put into 'special measures' by Ofsted. We then agreed to work with the Sixth Form College to address our individual concerns. We established a joint governing committee to identify the opportunities for joint working. It soon became obvious that a merger would be the best way forward. This would be a major challenge. The colleges were so different. One emphasised vocational education and inclusion whilst the other stressed academic excellence. On the other hand - what a perfect marriage!

In March 2005 we merged to become Tyne Metropolitan College, providing education for 15,000 students, with 500 staff and a budget of £21m.

The college immediately became the third largest employer in North Tyneside.

We tried to be radical in our structure creating four faculties. Centre for Professional Care and Education; Centre for Business and Technology; Centre for Creative and Leisure Studies and the Sixth Form Academy - more than a decade in advance of the Education Act that allowed all sixth form colleges to become academies.

Another innovation was to introduce the International Baccalaureate, again, well in advance of the English Baccalaureate becoming government policy.

However, the most radical aspect of how we worked during the amalgamation was to not focus on the traditional targets for improvement such as student success outcomes but on quality and organisational development targets.

At the time, our staff were the lowest paid in the region. Our new hypothesis was if we increased the pay of the staff we would be more likely to retain and attract quality

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staff and the subsequent increase in students would cover the costs, which would lead to an operating surplus. This was a big risk. Supported by a very able vice principal, finance and HR directors we agreed this way forward. The numbers increased and we achieved an operating surplus of £400k.

The quality improvement strategy was combined with an organisational change programme. We introduced targets, which focused on reducing bureaucracy, increasing responsibility, improving standards (of process and output), improving clarity (of direction and systems), emphasising rewards, celebrating success and improving team commitment.

These targets were introduced for the senior leadership team, middle management and the whole organisation and each year we measured whether we had achieved them.

The organisational climate improved and so did the outputs. The college success rates moved from bottom quartile to top quartile in four years.

There is an often quoted mantra from the Department of Education that standards go down during an amalgamation. We proved them wrong. The DfE and Learning and Skills Council described the amalgamation as 'exemplary'.

We then decided to have the formal opening of the new college in the second week of July 2005. Tony Blair, the then Prime Minister, agreed to perform the opening ceremony.

One week before at 8.50am on Thursday July 7, three bombs exploded simultaneously in London leaving 52 dead and over 700 injured. This was the worst bombing in London since WW2.

I left a message with Downing Street on the Friday simply saying we would absolutely understand if the Prime Minister would not be able to come.

At 8am on the Monday morning Downing Street rang to say he would not let us down.

He arrived spot on time and spent most of the morning talking to the students and the staff. For that I will always thank him.

Sometime later Mark Knopfler agreed to open a new facility in the college. He said he would have 'given his right arm to come to Tyne Met College' - quite a statement from one of the world's greatest guitarists. I knew what he meant.

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