**Editorial**

This special issue is borne out of the first *Reimagining Further Education* Conference that took place at Birmingham City University on 29th June 2016. A chance meeting between Matt O’Leary and Norman Crowther in November 2015 gave birth to the idea of this inaugural event in the back of a taxi on its way to New Street station in Birmingham! Lamenting the ongoing difficulties and challenges facing further education (FE) in England at the time and recognising the need for a forum in which practitioners and leaders could come together to debate and discuss these and collectively design positive ways forward for the sector, the decision was taken to organise the first #ReimagineFE conference.

The conference theme emerged from a desire to present a counter narrative to the parlous state of the sector at that time. Many leaders, managers and practitioners in FE providers were expressing alarm about what was going on and viewed the future with desperation. Buffeted by the ongoing reform in qualifications (with its corollary of a critical staffing shortage in some subjects – notably English and Maths), destabilised by the continuing debate about professional status as a consequence of the missed opportunity that was the Lingfield Report and above all pressurised by swingeing cuts to budgets as FE found itself bearing the brunt of the government’s austerity cuts in education, we felt it was an opportune time to bring people together from the sector to consider the current state of affairs and to imagine what FE could and should be.

Whilst events in the last few years in FE had certainly made the need for such a gathering all the more pressing in our minds, it is important to acknowledge that the conference was also borne out of a sentiment that the current plight of the sector was the culmination of twenty five years of reform following the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. Far from raising the status of FE providers and increasing their influence in providing meaningful and valued educational experiences between school and the world of work, the F & HE Act has instead made colleges vulnerable to every policy whim dreamt up by policy makers in the heightened instrumentalist approach to education that has come to characterise the neoliberalist agenda pursued by successive governments in England.

The timing of the conference was also significant. Less than a week before, on the 23rd June, the UK voted in the European Union membership referendum and a majority of the electorate voted to leave the EU. The ensuing debate about UK skills needs and a perceived over-reliance on ‘immigrant workers’ positions FE as a vital national, educational and economic asset. Nevertheless, the instrumentalist vision that has dominated policy thinking and decision making for the last twenty years seems far too narrow and, despite myriad interventions, initiatives and incentivisations, has never been hailed by governments as fulfilling the brief. At the same time, the people who work in FE see themselves as answering to a much broader remit than simply ‘supplying skills’. Is there then an argument about the need to reimagine the relationship between the state, the economy and further education?

In contrast to the conventional format of many conferences, a central aim of *Reimagining Further Education* was to put the “confer” back into conference, with a deliberate discursive focus to allow all delegates to participate as active contributors and meaning makers in discussion rather than limiting their involvement to passive listeners of a small group of speakers. Discussion groups were organised around six key thematic strands with delegates critically examining: apprenticeships and work-based learning, accountability and governance, sustainable models of teacher learning, leadership in FE, professionalism in FE and HE in FE.

The aim of these strands was to provide *fora* in which the experiences of practitioners and learners could be contextualised by the frame of policy. Rather than continue to react to policy, the conference was designed to interrogate and to reflect critically on the challenges facing the sector and to advocate positive ways forward. Keynote speakers framed the conference theme, then delegates broke out into participatory discussion strands. The discussions that took place in those strands formed the heart of the conference. Each thematic strand was led by a chair and a discussant to provide stimulate, orchestrate and record the discussion. These discussions were then fed back to the whole conference in a plenary.

The ethos of *Reimagining Further Education* was rooted in a genuine desire to move away from top-down decision-making. Instead, we were keen to embrace an inclusive, participatory model of discussion and decision making by capturing the diverse voices and interests representing the sector and injecting a much needed sense of agency into that discussion. The conference was deliberately designed to blur boundaries. Bringing together academics, researchers, practitioners and learners from higher and further education settings was a way of challenging established thinking and practice. These boundaries shape and constrain the way many of us talk and think about FE so conference discussions offered spaces in which to bridge the gaps of understanding between different ’stakeholders’. Connecting with hope and with agency, this boundary-breaking and this diversity were the ingredients that made reimagining possible.

Undoubtedly many of us have attended education conferences and listened to compelling speeches and interesting presentations, though the extent to which they have had a tangible impact on our professional lives and/or that of policy is questionable. By adopting an alternative methodology that sought to provide a platform for the voices of diverse participants to be heard, we wanted to confront some of these issues directly, to interrogate the field or habitus of conferences. Admittedly, we realised that what we were attempting to do would pull some people out of their comfort zones. Yet we were convinced this was essential if we were to challenge our normalised thinking and practice and genuinely enter into a process of reimagining not just FE as a sector but the function of academic conferences *per se*.

The conference was divided into two halves. The morning was devoted to framing the *status* *quo* of FE and reviewing its most pressing challenges in each of the six thematic strands. The afternoon sought to ‘reimagine’ what a future FE sector could and should look like by developing innovative and creative initiatives that would enhance agency, workforce development and the professional ethos of all FE practitioners. The articles in this special issue encapsulate some of the contemporary themes and issues of FE discussed during the event, whilst also offering an insight into future possibilities.

The articles in this special issue address a range of themes that link to the different strand conversations and employ a variety of lenses through which to reimagine FE.

The Teacher Learning strand of the conference is represented in this issue by three distinct contributions. The first paper from Victoria Wright, Theresa Loughlin and Val Hall focuses on the transition period for student teachers into their first year of teaching using the connected themes of teacher identity, communities of practice and ecological learning systems. The second paper from Jim Crawley addresses the paucity of research into teacher education in PCE and outlines the progress made in a collective ‘backward mapping’ exercise from a global perspective. The final paper by Alison Longden, Tom Monaghan, Lou Mycroft and Claire Kelly is a ‘think piece’ about how we might reimagine the teaching of technology in a digitally connected world through the lens of a longitudinal, small-scale action-research project focusing on digital resilience.

The HE in FE strand comprises two papers. The first by Alex Kendall, Michelle Kempson and Amanda French focuses on a research project that explored students’ transitions from FE into HE settings. They challenge what they perceive as undeveloped thinking around what constitutes readiness and the nature of transition experiences for these students and finish off by outlining the implications for HE teachers. The second by Janet Hobley draws on the concepts of practice architecture, middle leader and scholarship to explore the changing nature of a partnership between a HEI and a local college and the repercussions for an established community of practice of HE in FE lecturers.

The Professionalism in FE is made up of two contributions. The first is a joint paper from Catherine Lloyd and Sam Jones in which they reflect on their experiences of establishing a research group for colleagues in their college. With the initial aim of providing opportunities for those undertaking research to meet and discuss their work, the article charts their journey to date and concludes by considering the implications for others in the sector. The second contribution is an imaginative and provocative ‘think piece’ from Lou Mycroft that encourages the reader to reimagine FE as social purpose education with a focus on developing a greater sense of personal learning agency in our students.

Carlene Cornish’s article relates to the Work-based Learning strand. Adopting a case study approach, Cornish explores challenges some preconceptions about so-called disengaged young people in FE and the provision on offer for them.

Ali Hadawi and James Crabbe’s article reimagines the way FE could be funded. In a provocative article originating in the widespread concern about the current counterproductive and hugely problematic funding model, the authors reimagine an approach that seeks to outline how the social benefits of FE can provide a basis for a new funding approach.

Focusing on college governance, the final article from Abdulla Sodiq and Ian Abbott reimagines the role of academic staff governors. Drawing on recent doctoral research, the paper puts forward a series of recommendations to allow more opportunities for academic staff governors in FE to transform the scope of their role and to play a more active part in the ongoing governance and accountability of FE providers.

Special issue editors

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