

FE Voices – Session 2

What are colleges for?

The obvious answer to the first question the panel considered is of course that FE is there to provide education and training to allow people to live their best lives and to be constructive members of society. We are here to serve our communities.

Rehana wanted to turn the question around almost challenging FE to ask itself how hard it looks out to those communities to understand their real lives. She said, “We know that as Muslim women, a government all-party parliamentary group described the barriers to employment as a triple penalty... There are three layers that Muslim women in particular [have to deal with] because of their religious identity, because of their gender identity... because so many of us are from visible and from racialised communities. Women of colour have these multiple barriers when we access employment. So how do FE colleges fulfil their functions if they are not intimately connected with their communities and intimately understand, you know, all of those dreams, all of those aspirations, but also all of those barriers?”

This leads to the unavoidable question of whose responsibility is it to link us together with all the diverse groups and organisations with which we *should* be forging those connections? Is it primarily an FE college’s role to go out and create those relationships or is it down to those outside to hammer on the college’s door?

Paul said, “If anybody assumes it’s somebody else’s responsibility to do it, it’s going to lead to a problem... If we’ve learned anything over the past few months it’s [that it’s] all our responsibility. From outside the college, I want to be involved and I would hope that any college would be reciprocating in the opposite direction because where does any community begin and any community end? Any particular college is made up of individuals who are part of that community. It’s not like they shed off their community as they walk through the door of the college and pick it up on the way out. All of the issues that I have, all of my family background, all of my ethnicity, all of my financial stuff, all of my education... I bring those into the college, whether I’m staff or a student.”

Paul's undoubtedly right in that while we may have different personae at work, at home or with friends, there are certain parts of *who we are* which are unchanging and unchangeable. Oba gave us a timely reminder about how important it is for people to know who they are inside, and the way in which college can and should help them realise it, saying, "You can't prepare students for the world of work if you don't prepare them to engage with their own communities. If students don't understand their sense of belonging, what they bring in terms of their own story, what they can do and turn it to help other people and take that community forward, they're not going to be ready to walk into the scary place of your first day at work and to be able to make an impact... So, I think it's absolutely part of colleges' gift to be able to find opportunities for students to be able to link up with other organizations within the community, find opportunities, embed social action within courses, because we're talking about the same thing. We're talking about students being as prepared for their next steps as possible, whether that's from a general life sense or engaging in a world of work and progressing in a career as quickly as possible."

There was a general sense that to see colleges and communities as distinct is unrealistic and unhelpful, because they both exist in the same realm. Their interconnectedness outweighs their separateness. As Shalom put it, "Colleges represent our community and our community represent our colleges... The onus is on both sides, in my opinion. Further education is no longer one size fits all... As an employer, I'm a member of the community; as an employer the onus is also on me. If we have that inclusive mindset, it facilitates a diverse way of thinking. The biggest thing we have, whether we're in college or in the community is our social capital. That contributes to our genuine growth, personally and professionally... We feel safe with people who look like or sound like [us], those who have similar beliefs. [But] then ultimately, our social capital is limited... As a business owner I have to look in and say, the onus is also on me to reach out and actually understand the colleges that are in my community, and contribute towards the success of them."

Who do we serve and why?

The question which automatically arises is who do our colleges serve? These are independent businesses, albeit in a public space and with a public service remit, so where does self-serving begin and community service end? Paul was very clear, "When I was working at a college, it was right on that precipice between transitioning from "to be the best college in the area, we have to drive the hardest at getting our attainment tables up and getting the best pass marks and making the finances do the most," and it was transitioning over to understand, "if I want the very, very best for that student, I want the very best for them in a holistic well-rounded way in all of their life, not just in this class,

because when they leave, I don't want them to just be a dysfunctional person who has a good result in this class. I want them to be a... contributor to society.”

Having the will to collaborate for the benefit of all is one thing but the panel considered whether our communities understand the role that colleges actually want to play in society, or does society actually want something different from what colleges are offering? Rehana wondered if colleges appreciate that this is an asymmetric relationship. She said, “It's got to be a two-way relationship... but they're not, not two *equal* sides. We've got to recognize here that... colleges, educational institutions, whether they're schools, universities, sixth forms are places of power, institutions of power.” She said that this definitely put the onus on the colleges to do the heavy lifting in the relationship. “Wherever I go I would advocate for reaching outwards... thinking about our role and... how value can be built by drawing the community in and by understanding our communities... Communities are resources in themselves and we really need to recognize the value that... ordinary mums and dads can bring when they are engaged with the institutions that their young people are in.”

The subject of representation came up repeatedly in FE Voices 1, and here again Oba was clear that the lack of it was a potentially insurmountable hurdle for a college if it is to properly serve a community. He said, “To be completely effective, my belief is that you have to provide role models that students can buy into and relate to. [Over recent years] college leadership has said, ‘We can do better and we can make change, but they can't make changes to the leadership *that day*, but they want to do better so they want to get those lived experiences and okay, you can make positive change, absolutely you can break some of the structural barriers.” He recounted his own experience as a small child. “I was dropped into this country at twelve years old, the only black boy in my year, and there were no black teachers in my school... I didn't have leaders in terms of leaders in my own school in sixth form that I could look at and go, ‘Wow, that person is like me, and I can achieve that...’ If you're at a college where 80% are ethnic minority background, and they see... 90% of leadership not looking like them, and not having the same characteristics as them - in terms of the doors that they'll see as being open to them in their mind, it's going to have an effect, absolutely... It's imperative to bring in role models to those students to make them see, ‘yeah I can do incredible things; people break glass ceilings all the time.’”

Shahida agreed. “I can't help thinking of Marcus Rashford, the footballer. Because of him my nephew wants to now read... As a charity we fully support the role of mentors and role models... When I was at university, I did fashion, and I think, I joke about it, I was one of only two brown people on the course

and it was really important at that time. Had I seen another person who looked like me, I would probably have gone down a different route.”

But Raheda voiced a note of caution that colleges must not stop at taking the line of least resistance to apparent representation saying, “Bringing in people who look different does not equal diversity. That can sometimes be an easier fix - bring in your local imam or your local rabbi and you’ve got a bit of diversity there. What the sector really needs... is diversity of ideas and that doesn’t mean just bringing in people who look different but also to challenge you. Allyship is great as long as we’re all agreeing, but once that person who comes in makes you feel a little bit uncomfortable, you might not want to be their friend anymore. It’s holding onto that allyship and still being that ally, even when the conversation is making you feel uncomfortable, because it’s that discomfort that takes you on to a better place.”

Vocation V Academia – An unsquarable circle?

Role models are all about creating a perception of attainability, of even the *possibility* of success. But FE suffers from problematic perceptions of a different kind, that vocational qualifications are a second-rate route to a career – a feeling which Dawn said she knew only too well.

“I came through the apprenticeship route myself into engineering, and for a long time, I think I suffered with imposter syndrome, because in engineering, typically through the networks that I had, you were expected to have gone to university, got a degree, and then progressed into engineering that way... It was through work-based learning, further education, that apprenticeship that gave me the grounding to go on and do what I needed to do so, hopefully, we go back to the role model issue I’m there as a role model to those young people, those apprentices that are coming through... and I think you can't give enough credence to that whole concept of role modelling.”

We often think of this prejudice against vocational qualifications as being something in the mind of parents, but as Sufian painfully illustrated, children are often every bit as aware of the distinction as he has discovered in the playground. “.

He said, “If someone's trying a skill in football and they fail, [the other kids say], ‘Oh well, he’s a BTEC Ronaldo.’ And it's the use of that word, of a vocational qualification, with poorer or lesser performance.”

There is a frustration that we never seem to hear the stories of success where apprentices and other vocationally trained individuals have done great things – at least not as frequently as we do about graduates. Jason said it was time the sector learnt better how to get the good news out.

“It's that storytelling that really brings it home, that first-hand account of the impact apprenticeships have... on people's lives... In the Times today there was a story about UCAS, who are exploring how to make it as easy to apply for an

apprenticeship as it would be to university, because 50% of young people choose to do an apprenticeship or are interested in apprenticeship. That's a huge number... half a million kids a year... I think that the brand promise on apprenticeships has changed enormously. Yes, it's still misunderstood and there's still a perception that it is the "failed route" and you have to go to university to get anywhere, but I think that has moved enormously in the last five years, even the last two years... I think it will soon be seen [as an] unfair advantage. 'Oh lucky you, your kid went to do an apprenticeship while mine went to university. What a shame.' So I'm very positive about the future."

Dr. Majid Al-Kader trained as an engineer to a very high level taking the classically academic route only to discover years later that he'd been channelled in that direction by social pressure. "I discovered after years of doing it I hated engineering," he said. So much so that today he urges the children of his friends to consider carefully the benefits of a vocational education. "Having the practical training, practical qualification and engaging with commercial companies from a very early stage, it's a great advantage - more than what university student will have. By the time they finish, they've got a degree, but that doesn't mean they have experience like apprentices have. So that's a massive disadvantage... We should be more loud and we should be proud of it as well."

Shahida thought it was important to maintain a balance between promoting vocational study while not denigrating university.

"There's equal value in it, and I think it is about supporting the individual's choice... supporting the students making the choices, and the parents making those choices as well... I get individuals from disadvantaged communities saying that *my parents are saying this and my parents are saying that*... I'm Pakistani and my, my mom or dad said to me at the time that you don't have to be a doctor or whatever, as long as you get a degree... Just get a degree, and that's it."

As FE professionals we all have to ask ourselves, do we really *believe* that our sector is not for the failed, not second-rate, every bit as good as going to university? If we don't believe it in our hearts, we will never persuade society as a whole to believe it either, as Sufian wryly illustrated.

"As a young person, I always said I'm not going to be like my parents - never force my kids, but every time my son says he wants to have an ice cream van, and be an ice cream van man, I kind of want to drop in, 'Yes, you can run a chain of them, that would be great.'"

Rehana was more direct. "We need some more honesty about vocational qualifications... The truth is that they're not valued in the same way. We can lament it but we all know they're not, and what we really need is a top-down change in narrative... because to be honest at the moment it's painfully

classist... We know that there are these parallel dialogues that go along that if you haven't done well you do a BTEC, and if you have done well you do an A Level. But up the road from us in Bedford there are a whole load of private schools and nobody is having those conversations there, and by and large it's working-class young people who are taking vocational qualifications. I don't devalue them personally, I know they bring a lot of value to young people. I know they teach skills that A Levels don't, but I think if we really want to bring parity, we need to change the top-down narrative around them."

While recognising that in some communities there is an inherent bias in favour of universities, Dr. Majid said it was important that we understand why that view is so widely held.

"I'm also of Pakistani heritage," he said, "and my parents wanted me to do well because they didn't want me to experience the same poverty they did. I really want everyone to reflect for a moment on what it means to be a parent, somebody who has grown up and lived through poverty and the aspirations therefore that you want for your children."

Rehana pointed out how daunting it can be for young people going to an institution like an FE College which may seem so culturally unfamiliar and even intimidating.

"The challenge of fitting in is greater for people who are racialised. I'm chair of governors at an all-girls school and the vast majority of our girls are from racialised backgrounds... I know so many of them think they must dress in a particular way, they must speak in a particular way, in order to be seen as professional and in order to achieve success... Sitting as a family trying to balance all of these ideas, [trying to work out] what's the best way of getting there, because I recognise all of these things about me that are going to be a barrier to fitting in. There's already a barrier there. If I go down the BTEC route, and I'm hearing all of these things about BTEC, is that going to be another barrier? So, the discourse is classist and it has a particular impact for racialised people."

She said when it comes to deciding between academia and vocation, "Value doesn't just come from us saying they're [equally] valuable."

Potential ways forward

The problems are many and complex and it would be easy to be disheartened, but in summing up the panellists all offered their rallying cries for a future of greater parity and equality.

Sufian in particular felt it was really important to be on the front foot. He said, "The role [of colleges] is powerful in towns like Luton where food banks and division are on the rise, where you've got social breakdown in society with low aspirations of young people... The roll is there for colleges to come out of their front doors and say to people, 'we're part of this community, we're one of the

greatest parts that can make a difference...’ If we get the opportunities right for our young people and if we engage employers... well enough... [they] will have the most important thing at the end of their time there which is employability.”

He went on, “To be condemned at the age of sixteen because you didn’t revise or you couldn’t manage societal pressures and you didn’t make the cut at GCSEs - I want to do my history GCSE now, I hated it at GCSE, it was the wrong time for me... because it’s the right time for me now. What I’ve seen vocational qualifications do is give kids a second lease in life and an opportunity for them and for adults further on in life to go on and make something of their life, learn a new skill, learn a trade and make themselves more employable than you could if you just rely on that academic qualification and that structural system where you either make it at sixteen or you’re done for life.”

Dawn sounded a message of hope in her specialism.

“It’s about having those allies and advocates. I’m in contact with people at the association for BME engineers, and we’re watching avidly to see what comes out of the Hamilton review, so that we can support young engineering apprentices going through that programme.”

Dr Majid said, “It’s about encouraging the colleges to work closely with the community, educate the families, and just be proud about what colleges do, and working with the commercial companies, getting more engagement with everybody, because to me as a business owner, I had no idea what an apprenticeship could do until I started getting involved with my wonderful local Milton Keynes College and realised how great the students can be. Jason and I hopefully are both going to employ two or three apprentices come September because we love working with the students.”

Much of the discussion was around connectivity; how colleges and communities can come together for mutual benefit. But Jason demonstrated that difficult connections are not just about race or class, and that smaller businesses in particular need to be less *cut off* from FE.

He said, “Colleges need to be more visible around SMEs [Small and Medium-sized Enterprises] because they are the biggest shop window for skills a small business has. Every small business wants to grow and through their partnership with the college they *can* grow... I put it to Milton Keynes College and all colleges that being visible to small businesses is essential.”

Lack of a viable connection between colleges and businesses creates a clear barrier to collaboration, and Oba pointed out that sometimes colleges need to see beyond the apparent reluctance of young people to get involved.

“Sometimes we perceive a sixteen year old not getting involved as apathy when really it’s a lack of confidence, so we really need to find out what’s at the

root of it and explain to them that people care about their story, that they have power over the future of their community - not us older people... so giving them the confidence to be able to set their own platforms up and create their own agendas and make their own changes is so key.”