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Employee Engagement in Further Education

A research report from the Involvement and Participation Association (IPA), commissioned by Association of Colleges.

November 2014



About the IPA

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Introduction

Further education colleges are facing significant and growing challenges. With other areas of the education budget having been protected, the impact of austerity is falling disproportionately on the sector. At the same time, colleges are having to adapt to significant policy change, and to meet the needs of employers whilst constantly improving the quality of outcomes for learners. Colleges are being asked to deliver more for less.

The further education workforce is under considerable pressure. Its dedicated and driven employees are, in many cases, having to contend with significant organisational changes, increasing work pressure and ongoing pay restraint. Despite the best efforts of employers in the sector, the pressures on the workforce has inevitably had an impact on employee engagement.

This matters. There is growing evidence that employee engagement is absolutely crucial for organisational success. Research has shown that organisations with engaged employees – who feel motivated, loyal and involved – tend to be more productive and innovative, and have higher levels of customer satisfaction. In terms of the public sector, evidence is particularly strong in the NHS, where Trusts with higher levels of engagement have more satisfied patients and better clinical outcomes.

However, the evidence base on employee engagement in further education is weaker. This report aims to address that. It is based on in-depth case studies with six FE colleges, as well as a literature review and interviews with experts in the sector. We start by assessing the current level of employee engagement in the sector, finding that although staff are highly engaged with their role and vocation, engagement with the individual college tends to be lower. The evidence of the importance of engagement in further education is then examined, setting out the case for colleges to focus on and invest in this area. We then look in detail at the approach to engaging with employees at six FE colleges; Bishop Auckland College, City of Wolverhampton College, College of North West London, Gloucestershire College, Hull College and Queen Alexandra College. Building on these case studies, we draw out the three key factors that can help improve engagement at FE colleges; leadership and management; communication and employee voice; and values and the strategic narrative.

We would like to thank the employees and managers at the six colleges that took part for their time and help. We would also like to thank the interviewees who took part in the research. Finally, we would like to thank the Association of Colleges for making this work possible.

We hope that the research helps colleges better understand employee engagement and how important it is to organisational success. Every college faces different challenges, but we hope that this research will be of use in helping colleges understand how they might better engage with their workforce.

The next few years will not be easy as the funding reductions look set to continue. There is no simple answer to these challenges. But one thing is clear; by effectively engaging with their employees, colleges will be better able to adapt to the changing circumstances, and continue to drive up quality for learners.

Joe Dromey, Head of Policy and Research, IPA
November 2014

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Executive Summary

It is clear that the picture of employee engagement in further education is decidedly mixed. Employees in the sector tend to be highly motivated and they derive a sense of satisfaction from their work. They also seem to be proud to work in the sector. However, although engagement with the role and vocation appears to be strong, engagement with the employer – the college – appears much weaker. Employees appear unwilling to recommend their college as a place to work, most do not feel valued by their employer, levels of involvement are very low and employee wellbeing appears to be poor. There seem to be low levels of trust with senior leaders, and employees are dissatisfied with the effectiveness of communication within colleges. There are consistent patterns in terms of employee perceptions by job role with teachers/lecturers being the least engaged; something that is particularly worrying given they are the main interface with learners.

Although there has been little work done on the sector, it is clear that employee engagement is absolutely vital in further education. There is a strong evidence base from other sectors that employee engagement is linked to productivity, customer satisfaction and innovation. Organisations with engaged staff tend to have higher employee wellbeing, and lower turnover and sickness absence. In terms of colleges in particular, there was a consistent perception in the literature review, case studies and interviews that employee engagement was fundamental to good learner outcomes. Having engaged and motivated staff was seen as crucial to delivering high quality teaching and learning. Colleges also highlighted the link between employee engagement and retention, sickness absence and employee advocacy.

In terms of building employee engagement in further education, we found there were three key factors that colleges need to focus on. These were common themes coming out of the six case studies, as well as the literature review and expert interviews.

First, colleges need to have strong and engaging **leadership and management**. Senior leaders play an important role in engaging staff, with the Principal being particularly important. They need to see engagement as a high-level strategic priority – something that needs to be measured, focused on and invested in. Leaders need to communicate effectively with employees across the college, including through face-to-face contact, and allow employees opportunities to raise questions. Leaders also need to be visible and approachable across the college. Line managers play a significant role. They need to ensure effective performance management and team working. Given the growing strain on the further education workforce, they need to manage and reduce the pressures on their staff. The evidence suggests that employees are relatively positive about their line managers, but less confident in senior leadership.

Second, having effective **communication and employee voice** is important for building employee engagement at colleges. Colleges need to ensure they have robust and effective communication strategies in place, with a wide variety of channels, and that information is shared readily and extensively. Promoting a strong employee voice at a college is absolutely fundamental for engagement. Employees need to be involved in decision-making and given a variety of opportunities to have their say, including through whole college meetings, effective team meetings, staff forums and well-designed staff surveys. Where there are effective partnership relationships between managers and trade union representatives, this can help support both employee voice and engagement. As well as encouraging and enabling employees to offer their views, colleges need to support a culture of

empowerment where frontline staff are actively able to make improvements happen.

Finally, colleges need to consider the role of **values and the strategic narrative**. Colleges need to have a strong set of organisational values that are clearly defined and well-understood by employees. Such values are most effective when employees are given a say in their development, and when they are consistently communicated. Organisational values should emphasise the importance of high-quality teaching and learning. They need to be reflected by the behaviour of managers and leaders, and in decision-making. Having a strong and effective strategic narrative – which sets out the college's values, mission and aims – is particularly important during times of change.

There is a huge amount of change taking place within the further education sector. Given the significant budget cuts for the sector, and the fact that labour costs make up a substantial part of a college's budget, cuts will inevitably impact the workforce. Evidence on the extent of **readiness for change** in the sector appears mixed. There seems to be a clear understanding among the workforce of the financial situation colleges face and the need for change.

Employees generally seem to divorce the national from the local, not letting evident frustrations with the Department for Education cloud the relationship with their own college. The sector is also well-used to change. However, there is evidence that employees are frustrated about a perceived lack of involvement in change, and a growing risk of 'change fatigue'.

There is clear evidence of the **importance of employee engagement during change**. First, with reduced budgets and the need to do more for less, colleges will need to be more innovative. Frontline employees have a detailed understanding of their role and the needs of their students; they know best what will work. They need to be empowered to develop and implement new and more efficient ways of working. Secondly, employee engagement is vital for effective decision-making. With colleges facing difficult re-organisations, employees need to be involved – individually and collectively – to give them a voice and ensure the correct decision is made. Finally, employee engagement is vital in order to ensure staff have buy-in to the change process. If staff understand the rationale for change, feel the process has been managed effectively, and that they have been given a say, they will be more likely to readily accept the result.

There are some significant **challenges to employee engagement during change**. First, there is a risk that organisational change – particularly when it involves significant redundancies – will undermine engagement. This is particularly a risk when staff feel they have not been consulted, a feeling that seems common in the FE workforce. Beyond the impact of organisational change on staff themselves, if the process is perceived to have a negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning, this could lead to friction and disengagement. There is a risk that organisational change and a reduction in headcount will add further to the already high levels of job stress. And although pay is not the primary motivator of the FE workforce, there is a risk that with the ongoing pressure on pay, discontent in this area will grow and further undermine engagement.

There is a paradox around employee engagement and organisational change; engagement is particularly important during times of change; yet engagement itself risks being undermined by organisational change. There is some clear evidence around **successful approaches to engaging staff during change**. First, senior leaders play a vital role. They need to be clear about the challenges the college faces and explain why change is necessary. They need to be open, honest and transparent in sharing information. Secondly, employee voice is crucial. Employees need genuine influence over the process and to be involved early. Colleges need to consult both directly with employees and indirectly through the trade unions and staff forums.

There is evidence from other parts of the public sector – notably the Civil Service and the NHS – that austerity and organisational change need not lead to a fall in engagement; in fact it has increased in both areas in recent years. There is no reason why colleges cannot do the same. Through more effectively engaging with their dedicated and motivated workforce, colleges will be better able both to face the significant challenges that lay ahead of them, and to further improve outcomes for learners.

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Defining Employee Engagement

There has been growing interest in recent years with the concept of employee engagement. As the evidence based on the subject has developed, employers have increasingly become aware of the links between engagement and organisational success.

There is no universally accepted definition of 'employee engagement'. Some see engagement as a state of mind or perception among employees that is easily and empirically measurable in a staff survey. Such an approach is used in the NHS where employee engagement is measured by a compound index made up of nine questions in three areas; staff advocacy, motivation and involvement.¹ This approach is also evident in AON Hewitt's much-used model of engagement which measures employee perceptions in three areas:

- SAY – Talking positively about their work and the organisation
- STAY – Long term loyalty to their job and employer
- STRIVE – Inspiration to constantly deliver good work and motivation to contribute more than is normally required to do their job

Others however see engagement in terms of an approach to managing staff, something that is 'done to' employees.² One such example of this approach is the definition adopted by MacLeod and Clarke in *Engaging for Success* which describes engagement as follows; *"a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organisation's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being."*³

In this report, we used the Institute of Employment Studies definition of engagement; *'a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of the business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organisation. The organisation must work to develop and nurture engagement which requires a two-way relationship between employee and employer.'*⁴ This is a broader definition of engagement that encompasses both of the approaches mentioned above. We aim to look both at engagement in terms of the employee perceptions (satisfaction, commitment, advocacy, involvement etc.) as well as the employer approaches that can help successfully to engage employees.

1 NHS Staff Survey, 2013, www.nhsstaffsurveys.com

2 Kerstin Alfes, Catherine Truss, Emma Soane, Chris Rees, Mark Gatenby, *Creating an Engaged Workforce*. London, CIPD, 2010, p. 4

3 Nita Clarke and David MacLeod, *Engaging for Success: Enhancing performance through employee engagement*, BIS, 2009, p. 9

4 <http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/summary/summary.php?id=408>

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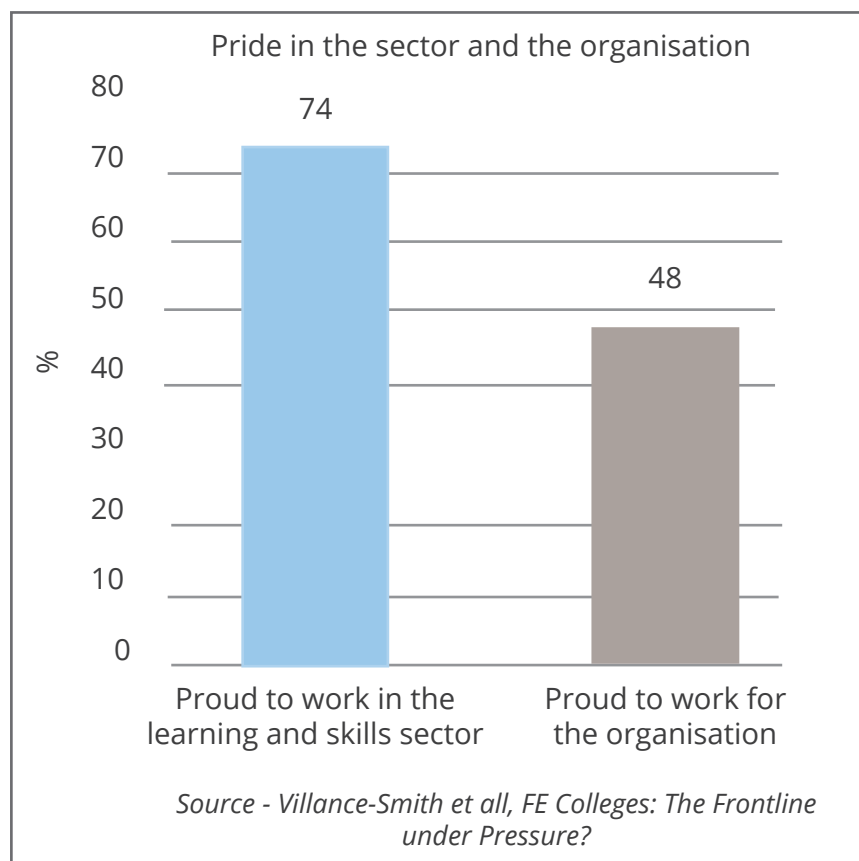
Assessing the level of employee engagement in further education

Measuring the level of employee engagement across further education (FE) as a sector is challenging given the lack of a sector-wide staff survey. Some areas of the public sector such as the NHS and the Civil Service have standardised staff surveys that allow for engagement to be accurately measured, and to be compared between areas and over time. However, there have been a number of other sources that allow us to assess levels of engagement in FE. These tend to agree that the picture of employee satisfaction and engagement in colleges is mixed.

First, on the positive side, staff in FE seem to have a strong degree of intrinsic **motivation** in their work. This motivation tends to be altruistic and focused on the social purpose of further education. Survey evidence shows that the top two reasons employees go in to the sector are to help learners achieve their goals and to make a contribution to society, with issues such as pay and holidays coming well down the list. As one study concluded, *'people who work in further education are uniquely committed to their jobs and the social purpose of the sector.'*⁵

'There's a very strong sense from the teachers that they're here for the good of the students.'

Jacqui Gerrard, Chair



Job satisfaction in FE seems to remain relatively high. Research by the Institute for Learning found that employees at colleges *'were passionate about their role, frequently using the word "love" to describe how they felt about their jobs. Many talked about the challenging environment in a positive way, finding it stimulating with lots of variety.'*⁶ A large-scale survey by the Learning and Skills Network and University and Colleges Union (UCU) in 2008 found very high levels of satisfaction with 83 per cent of employees saying they enjoyed their job, above the benchmark figure for the UK as a whole of 78 per cent.⁷ Similarly, QDP Services who surveyed 11,102 staff from 35 providers of further education institutions this year, found that almost seven in ten (69 per cent) employees enjoyed their work.

5 Frank Villeneuve-Smith, Silvia Munoz and Ewan McKenzie, *FE Colleges: The frontline under pressure? A staff satisfaction survey of further education colleges in England*, Learning and Skills Network and UCU, 2008 p. 8

6 Employee Perceptions of Further Education, Institute for Learning, 2012, p. 5

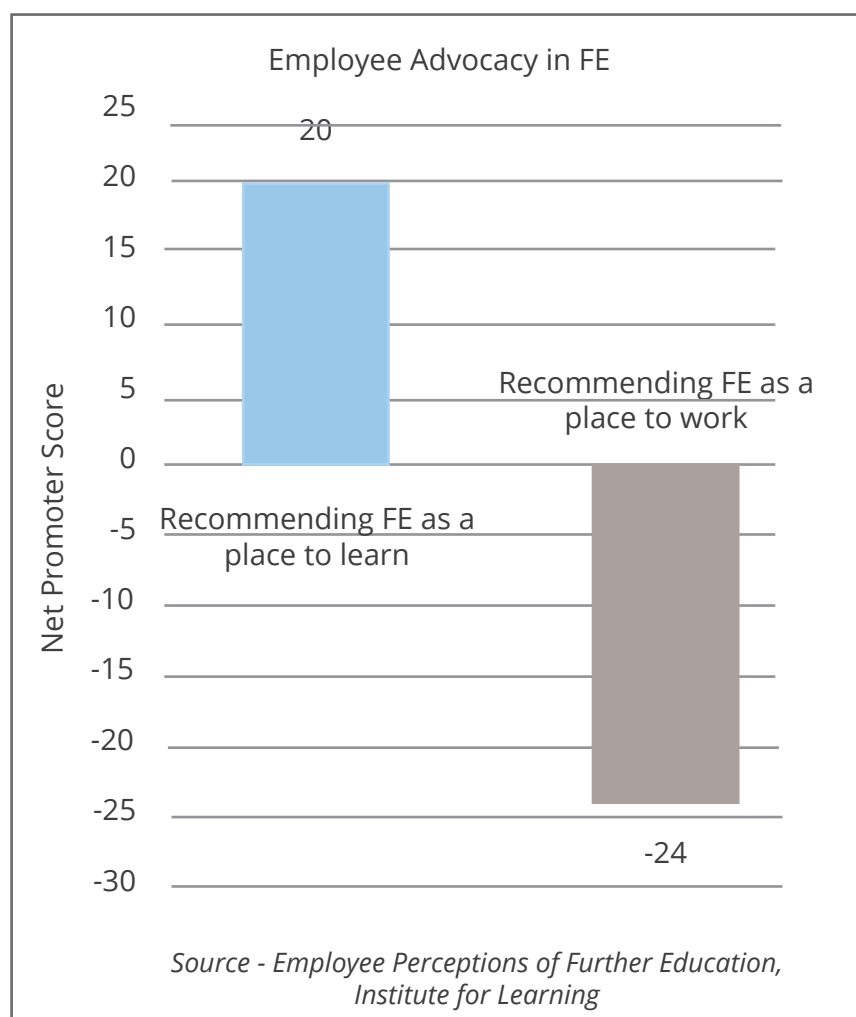
7 Villeneuve-Smith et al, *FE Colleges: The frontline under pressure?* p. 12 – the sample size of the survey was 3,000

However, this is a fall from previous three academic years, when 9 in 10 employees (92 per cent) said that they enjoyed their work. Nevertheless, most employees in further education seem to be positive about their roles and this also came through very strongly in interviews and focus groups with employees at case study colleges visited as part of this research.

As well as being generally satisfied with their role, employees in FE tended to exhibit high levels of **pride** in their vocation. Again, this came through strongly in the case study colleges with employees displaying a sense of vocation and pride in their work. The Learning and Skills Network found that three in four employees in FE were proud to work for the sector. However, this sense of pride did not stretch to the individual college; whereas 74 per cent of employees were proud to work in the sector, just 48 per cent were proud to work for their organisation – a gap of 26 per cent.⁹ As we shall see, this gap in perceptions towards the sector/vocation and the organisation/college is evident in other areas too.

Although employees tend to exhibit a sense of job satisfaction and pride, the picture is far more mixed in terms of **advocacy**. This is commonly used as an indicator of employee engagement, with the willingness to recommend the organisation as a place to work being included in the measurement of engagement in both the NHS and Civil Service staff surveys. Employees in FE were generally willing to recommend FE as a place to study, but they seem far less willing to recommend the sector as a place to work. In a recent survey, the Institute for Learning used the 'net promoter score' – a measure of advocacy – and found that employees were positive about the sector as a place to learn (+20) but negative about the sector as a place to work (-24). Reasons given for this negative rating focused on inconsistent management with unrealistic expectations, as well as the heavy workload and increasing pressure.¹⁰ A similar, although less stark, pattern is visible in the NHS staff survey where employees are six per cent more likely to recommend their trust as a place to receive treatment than as a place to work.¹¹

In addition to this unwillingness to recommend the sector as a place to work, employees in FE also tended to be less positive about their college than about the sector overall. As the Learning and Skills Network and UCU found, just 39 per cent of employees in FE would recommend their organisation as a place to work (31 per cent for lecturers and teachers), compared to 53 per cent who would recommend working in the sector. However, both figures are well below the average for the UK workforce as a whole, 67 per cent of whom would be willing to recommend their organisation as a place to work.¹²



9 Villeneuve-Smith et al, *FE Colleges: The frontline under pressure?* p. 14

10 *Employee Perceptions of Further Education*, p76

11 NHS Staff Survey, 2013, www.nhsstaffsurveys.com

12 Villeneuve-Smith et al, *FE Colleges: The frontline under pressure?* p. 16

There is evidence that employees in FE do not feel sufficiently **valued** by their employer. The Learning and Skills Network survey found that just 35 per cent of employees felt valued by their employer compared to 42 per cent who did not. This is far lower than the national benchmark of 56 per cent who agreed they felt valued.¹³ They identify this as a potential explanation for the fact that the high levels of job satisfaction didn't seem to translate into pride in and advocacy for the organisation. However, employees in FE feel much more valued by their line manager with almost three in five employees (62 per cent) reporting positively in this aspect.

'Despite being positive about FE and willing advocates for studying in the sector, staff, overall, are not active advocates of working in FE... Staff believe in the product but are disenchanted by the management, workload and government protocols and targets.'

There also seems to be low levels of **involvement** of the workforce in FE. Kinman and Wray found in a survey last year that employees in the sector score far below the average in terms of job control where FE employees averaged at 2.92 out of 5 compared to a benchmark for the UK workforce of 3.32. The gap is even bigger in terms of change where the score was 2.35, well below the benchmark of 3.54.¹⁴ Similarly, the QDP survey found that only two in five employees thought that the management consulted them before any major change (43 per cent) with a similar number (41 per cent) saying they are given enough information on why the change was happening. Both scores have declined substantially in recent years.

Institute for Learning, Employee Perceptions of Further Education

Finally, there are also some worrying signs in terms of employee **wellbeing**. Kinman and Wray examined UCU members in FE against the seven Health and Safety Executive's 'stressor categories' – factors which have a strong evidence base as predictors of both employee well-being and

organisational performance. Members in FE performed consistently lower in all seven categories compared both to other areas of education and to the national benchmark.¹⁵

'It is a source of concern that the professionals who spend the most time delivering the core business of further education – teaching and learning – are the most dissatisfied.'

Learning and Skills Network, Employee Perceptions of Further Education

The picture that emerges is of a workforce which is highly motivated and altruistic, has a strong sense of vocation and pride in the sector, and derives a sense of satisfaction from the work. The Institute for Learning describes what appears to be a 'loyal and satisfied workforce representing people who are

committed and professional and who are passionate about their work in the sector.'¹⁶ However, although showing strong attachment to the role and the sector, employees seem markedly less positive about their institutions. In relation to their own college, employees appear to have lower levels of pride, many do not feel valued and few are willing to recommend it as a place to work. Employees also appear to have relatively low levels of involvement and wellbeing.

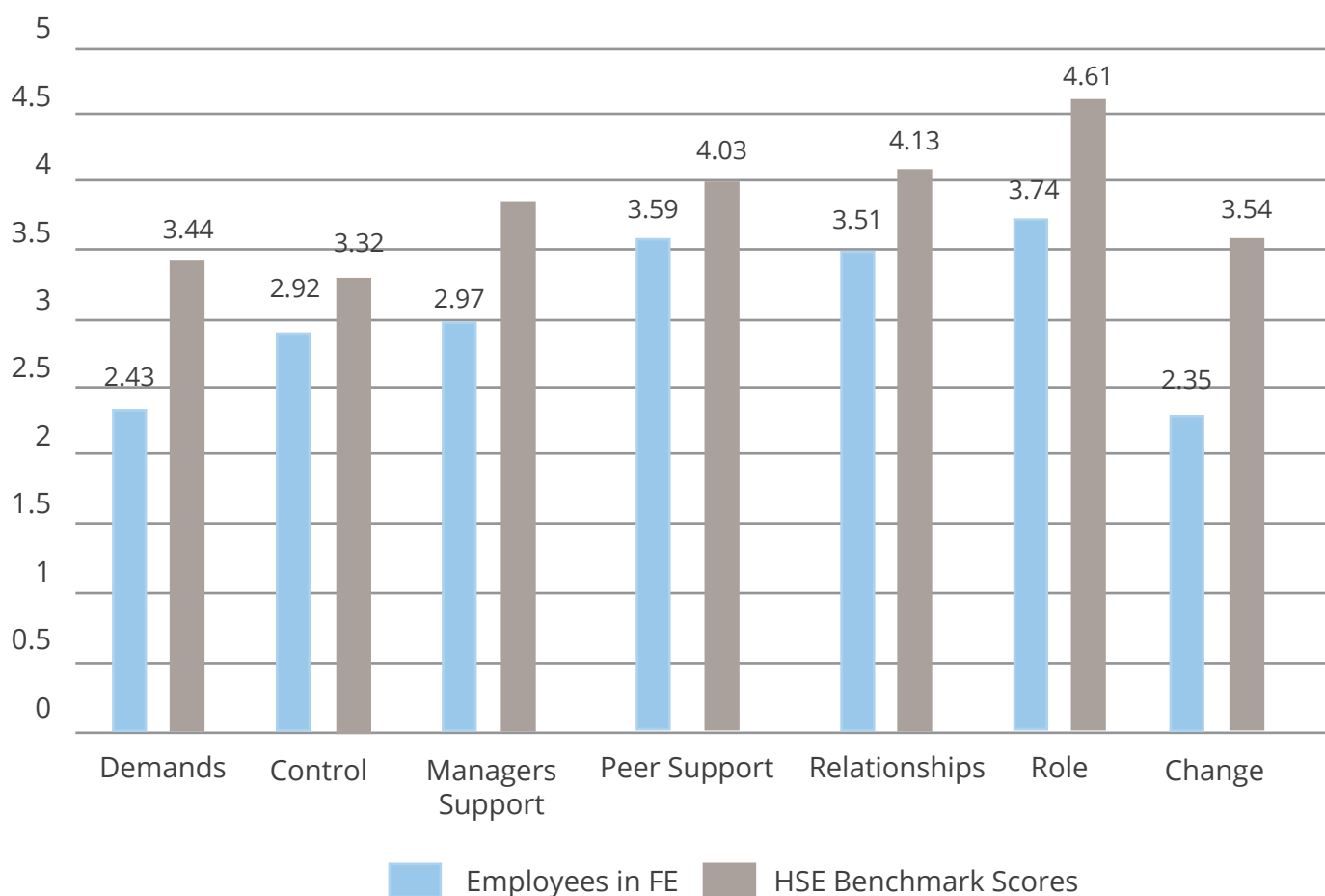
13 Villeneuve-Smith et al, *FE Colleges: The frontline under pressure?* p. 17

14 Gail Kinman and Siobhan Wray, *Further Stress: A survey of stress and wellbeing among staff in Further Education*, UCU, 2013 p15 and 25

15 Kinman and Wray, *Further Stress*, p. 32

16 *Employee Perceptions of Further Education*, p. 7

FE Performance against the National Benchmark for HSE's Seven 'Stressor Categories'



Source - Kinman and Wray, *Further Stress*

Variations in employee engagement

There are some clear variations in employee engagement by job role in further education. Across a number of areas, it appears that teachers and lecturers are the least engaged, with senior managers being the most engaged. The Institute for Learning found in a recent survey that front line teaching staff enjoyed their role the least – scoring 3.7 out of 5, whilst Principals and CEOs scored at 4.7. Teaching staff were also found to be less proud of the organisation and less likely to advocate for it. They therefore conclude that *'those at the coalface of delivery with most influence on quality and the student experience, are the least satisfied in their roles.'*¹⁷

This pattern was visible at the case study colleges. Staff surveys tended to show that managers were the most positive and engaged, followed by support staff, with academic staff being the least positive.

Given the lack of a sector-wide staff survey, it is difficult to assess the exact level of variation between colleges in terms of employee engagement. However, both anecdotally and from the evidence of Ofsted reports and other sources, there does seem to be significant variations in employee engagement between colleges. Research by Davies and Owen found that *'what happens within colleges does make a substantial difference to staff attitudes, and that attitudes are by no means determined primarily by the external educational environment.'*



5

Why engagement matters

So why does this matter? There is a growing body of evidence that employee engagement is strongly linked to organisational success. In this section, we look briefly at the evidence of the positive outcomes of employee engagement in general – as well as the benefits for FE colleges in particular.

Research has shown that employee engagement is associated with a wide range of positive outcomes, both for employees and for organisations. A number of reports have shown that organisations in the private sector with higher levels of engagement tend to have higher levels of productivity and financial performance.¹⁸ Engagement matters in the public sector too – there is particularly strong evidence of the importance of engagement in the NHS. Engagement has been shown to be a strong predictor of patient satisfaction, financial performance and even clinical outcomes such as patient mortality at NHS Trusts.¹⁹ Engaged employees seem to be more innovative, and there is strong evidence from both the private, public and third sectors that organisations with higher levels of engagement have lower levels of turnover and sickness absence.²⁰

As there is no sector-wide staff survey in further education, it is difficult to examine the positive outcomes associated with employee engagement in FE, as we can with the NHS for example. However, from the literature review, the expert interviews and the case studies, there are a number of factors that seem to be related to engagement.

First, there does seem to be evidence of a link between engagement and **learner outcomes**. This is identified in some of the literature on employee perceptions in FE. The Institute for Learning found that colleges achieving higher Ofsted grades *'appear to have moved some way forward in improving employee engagement... in order to achieve an 'outstanding' grade there needs to be robust employee engagement – staff need to be on board and demonstrating a commitment to quality.'*²¹ Davies and Owen also found evidence to suggest that *'positive staff attitudes help to produce successful colleges.'*

This relationship was also highlighted at many of the case study colleges. As one employee at City of Wolverhampton College explained, *'that's going to show to the students and it will affect what they do and the environment they're in. I think it's really important to get the staff engaged as otherwise the students won't progress as they should do or achieve to the best of their ability.'* Jacqui Gerrard, Chair of Governors at Strode's College argued that employee engagement has *'a direct result on the performance of students.'* Finally, Sir Bernard O'Connell – the former Principal of Runshaw College – argues that *'high staff morale is not just about being caring - itself a sufficiently worthy reason for making staff feel valued - but it is also about being effective in delivering high- quality provision to students.'*

'There's a very straight forward relationship between the staff beating the same drum and then having good quality for students.'

Joy Mercer, Director of Education Policy, AoC

18 Bruce Rayton, Tanith Dodge and Gillian D'Analeze, *The Evidence* – Employee Engagement Task Force, 2012

19 Michael West and Jeremy Dawson, *Employee engagement and NHS Performance*, The Kings Fund, 2012

20 Rayton et al, *The Evidence*

21 *Employee Perceptions of Further Education*, p. 7

There could be a question over cause and effect here. One might argue that employees would inevitably be more likely to be engaged at a high-performing college with good results and a strong reputation. However, the weight of evidence would suggest that having an engaged workforce helps contribute to student engagement and learner outcomes.

There is evidence that the relationships between employee engagement and **retention**, visible in other sectors, also exists within further education. In terms of retention, the desire to stay at a college in the long term was regularly pointed to as an outcome of engagement at the case study colleges. The Institute for Learning therefore argue that *'a more strategic focus on employee engagement is clearly required to help to retain motivated and engaged staff that can meet quality standards.'* There is evidence of a challenge here with turnover having increased from 15.5 per cent in 2011/12 to 18.2 per cent in 2012/13.²² Retention is particularly important given the challenges colleges face in recruiting staff in the current financial climate.

As has been shown in other sectors, there also seems to be a relationship between engagement and **sickness absence** in FE. This was prevalent at case study colleges and was also reflected in the literature review. Kinman and Wray found that staff who have low work-related wellbeing have higher levels of sickness absence, something they described as a *'serious cause for concern for employers.'* They also noted a project in higher education that, through spreading best practice, had managed to improve both employee engagement and sickness absence rates. There is, therefore *'a strong business case for managing the work-related well-being of staff in post compulsory education.'*²³ This is particularly important given that staff absence seems to be on the rise. Sickness absence increased from an average of 8.4 days per employee in 2012/13 (3.84 per cent of available working time), up from 7.9 days (3.70 per cent) in 2011/12. An increase was noted across all employee groups and it now stands at a record high.²⁴

Finally, there is also evidence that employee engagement is linked to **advocacy** in further education. Advocacy is not just a good in and of itself, but having employees willing to speak positively about the college is also an important driver of reputation locally and therefore of student recruitment. The Institute for Learning found recently that there was *'a clear alignment between satisfaction and advocacy and therefore a focus on improving staff engagement is critical to the improvement of advocacy.'*²⁵

22 Survey of Recruitment and Retention in Further Education Colleges 2013, AoC, p.3

23 Kinman and Wray, *Further Stress*, p. 33

24 Survey of Sickness Absence in Further Education Colleges 2012/13, AoC, 2013, p. 3

25 Employee Perceptions of Further Education, p. 7

6

Case Studies

This section comprises of six case studies examining the approach to employee engagement at six further education colleges. The colleges represent a cross-section of the sector; large and small, specialist and mainstream, from across the country. In each case we draw out the key lessons before going on to examine the factors that can help build employee engagement in further education.

Bishop Auckland College



Bishop Auckland College is a £13.6m turnover FE college based in County Durham and supporting around 8,000 students. Rated as good by Ofsted, it is improving fast and working towards outstanding.

Engaging effectively with employees is seen as a strategic priority and something that is absolutely crucial to the success of the College. As Natalie Davison, Principal/Chief Executive at Bishop Auckland College sets out, their strategic plan *'makes it clear that we aim to be an exceptional employer of exceptional people, and the reason we emphasise that is because we know it will give exceptional results.'* The College was awarded Investors in People Gold accreditation in July 2014.

Senior Leadership and the strategic narrative

There is a strong senior leadership team at Bishop Auckland College that play an important role in engaging with the workforce. Employees seem to rate them highly – there is very high recognition of the senior managers with 92 per cent knowing who they are, 18 percentage points above the benchmark figure for FE. Over nine in ten staff believe the Principal promotes a culture of excellence (93 per cent) and eight in ten say the College is managed effectively and efficiently – both well above the average. This was recognised in the last Ofsted report.

Both employees and Ofsted commented on the extent to which senior managers were both visible and accessible across the college. As Clare Wray, Director of Service Standards argued *'it's important that staff see you. You need to be out and about, talking to the staff and in to offices, so they see you and communicate with you in that way.'* This was seen as helping employees feel valued, and enabling them to relate to senior managers and communicate freely with them. Employees felt able to raise issues with managers and were confident that they were listened to.

Bishop Auckland College has a very clear strategic direction. Employees seem both to understand and identify with this; 90 per cent say they are aware of the college's strategic plan, 23 percentage points above the benchmark figure for FE, and 89 per cent say they are aware of the college's values. This was summed up by one employee; *'it's clearly defined what our goals are as a College. We all know what our objectives are that we're working towards and we're all pulling in the same direction.'*

'We are a friendly college. If you can speak to the managers in the corridor and they know who you are, it gives the place a nice feeling – it's more positive, it makes you feel more part of the team.'

Employees – along with other stakeholders – were extensively involved in developing both the strategic direction and the values of the college. There was a staff conference which reviewed the draft strategic plan, values and mission, and then discussed how the organisation might need to change to deliver on the plan. As one employee explained, *'it came from the whole staff really. It was "what do we want to be in our mission statement".'*

The college's ambitions are defined by its six strategic priorities and 'Pillars of Performance', and these are mainstreamed throughout the organisation. Team and individual goals are linked to these,

enabling employees to see how they contribute.

Line Managers

In addition to having strong senior leaders, Bishop Auckland College also appears to have effective and supportive line managers. Employees tend to rate their managers highly; nine in ten say their manager makes them feel valued (89 per cent) and that they receive good support from their manager (88 per cent). Both are above the average for the sector.

There is a clear understanding at the college of the sort of behaviours and skills they expect from managers, matched by support for them to do their job effectively. Having regular contact, through team meetings and individual catch-ups with line management, was seen as being important, and something that was easier at a smaller college.

Communication and employee voice

There seems to be effective internal communication at Bishop Auckland College. This was noted by Ofsted who found that communication *'has improved significantly and staff value the open and transparent Principal's briefings, staff conferences and workshops.'* Employees tended to welcome the extent to which college leaders were honest with them about the challenges facing the college. Seven in ten (69 per cent) employees in the staff survey rated communications in the college as good, above the benchmark score for FE.

As well as communicating key messages to employees, the college is particularly effective at enabling employees to have their say. Four in five say that their views are considered (79 per cent), with three in four (73 per cent) feeling their views are valued, both significantly higher than the average for the sector.

Bishop Auckland College uses a wide variety of communication channels to encourage employee voice. They have an effective annual staff survey, which not only helps measure employee satisfaction, but also involves them in every step of the process. Staff were involved in designing the questionnaire; as Clare Wray explained, she established a working group of employees and told them *'this is your survey, tell us what you want included.'* Following the survey, the results are fed back to staff with managers asked to develop actions in response to any areas of concern along with the employee working group.

Employees at the college meet regularly in order to share ideas. In addition to regular team meetings, there are weekly Curriculum, Quality and Student Support (CQSS) meetings in which Advanced Practitioners, Learning Area Managers and cross-College Managers get together to ensure planning is coherent and to resolve any emerging issues. There are termly staff conferences, allowing all employees to get together, discuss challenges, assess performance and plan for the term ahead. As well as providing an opportunity for employees to raise their views, they also have the chance to shape the agenda for the meeting themselves. As well as these regular meetings, there are periodic focus groups with small groups of employees to discuss particular issues, and staff suggestions.

There is a strong and positive relationship with the trade unions at Bishop Auckland College. The trade unions are seen as partners and management encourage new staff to join a union. Since the introduction of the Information and Consultation of Employees regulations in 2005, the college has had a hybrid Joint Consultative

'We know why it's important, it's the same as why we include students in decision-making. If people know you are listening to them... they know they are part of the organisation. If there is change happening and you can involve people, change is likely to be smoother and will benefit the organisation. We have always listened to our staff and consider that a strength.'

Judith Layfield, Director of Industry, Innovation and Skills

Committee which includes both union, and non-union representatives, who are elected to represent all employees. According to Clare Wray, 'it has never looked back' and it continues to work effectively. Union and non-union reps meet together with Clare on a monthly basis to discuss any upcoming changes or emerging concerns.

There is a commitment to involving staff in change and decision-making at the college. As Natalie Davison explained, this is based on a recognition that 'people on the front line understand far better than senior managers do, on a technical level what exactly happens day to day.' There is also a belief that change works best when staff are involved and given a say. The college has worked hard to involve staff in the difficult change process and reflect their views and suggestions. One such example was a team which – when faced with the prospect of redundancies – decided instead that they should all reduce their hours in order to protect jobs.

In addition to being extensively consulted on change, employees are encouraged to be innovative and to suggest ideas for improving services. This is done through discussions in team meetings, staff conferences, and through line managers encouraging staff to make suggestions and act on them. This is reflected in the college's values, which state that 'innovation and enterprise will be at the heart of everything we do.' This is also clear in the staff survey which shows that 93 per cent believe the college is committed to continuous improvement, 16 percentage points higher than the average for the sector.

Learning and development

There is a really strong commitment to staff learning and development at Bishop Auckland College. It achieves incredibly high scores on the staff survey in this area – 94 per cent of employees say the college is committed to staff training and development, 22 percentage points above the average for FE.

For the last two years, the college has had a 'learning and development slot' – an hour off timetable given to all teaching staff on Tuesday afternoons. This was in response to employees in the past raising concerns that they did not have enough time to take part in learning and development and showing good practice. Employees can choose how they use this hour. As Elizabeth Lamb, Director of Quality explained, 'we don't expect them all to go to the same CPD event; we look at what they need as individuals and tailor the support accordingly.' This approach has won praise from Ofsted and is popular among employees.

There is also a strong focus on helping employees progress and develop in their careers. Richard Hinch, Director of Curriculum at Bishop Auckland College explained how the college invests heavily in staff CPD opportunities 'we're always looking for the next rising stars. If you look at our managers, most have come up from within.'

The approach to employee engagement at Bishop Auckland College is obviously successful. Rated as good by Ofsted in 2011, the college has been improving fast and delivering some excellent results. Staff satisfaction is very high – nine in ten employees would recommend the college as a place to work, 15 percentage points above the average for the sector. The senior leaders at the college are visible and accessible. They communicate effectively and set a clear strategic direction for the college. Employees have a strong voice at the college and are involved in decision-making and change. There is a strong focus on learning and development – supported by effective line managers – which helps employees feel valued and engaged.

Key Lessons:

- Senior leaders need both to set a clear sense of strategic direction and be visible and accessible
- There needs to be a variety of opportunities for employees to speak up and have their say
- Employees need to be involved in change and given an opportunity to influence the process
- Effective learning and development opportunities can help employees feel valued and engaged.



City of Wolverhampton College

The City of Wolverhampton College educates over 4,500 students based across three main campuses.

The college has faced some significant challenges in the last few years. It received an inadequate grade from Ofsted and poor feedback from the Skills Funding Agency in 2012 before facing a large scale Section 188 redundancy process. However, under new leadership, and with a strong focus on engaging employees, the college has turned a corner and is improving fast.

Senior leaders and communication

Employees across the college recognised the role of the senior leadership team and, in particular, the new Principal Mark Robertson in turning things around.

'The main challenge has been to move the college around from where we were. I've been here 20 years so I've seen a massive turnaround in the last 12 months. It's been a massive breath of fresh air.'

Pali Kaur, a Curriculum Manager

Senior managers are seen as highly accessible by employees across the college. Tracey Cole, a Deputy Payroll Manager said that *'our senior management team here now are far more visible. You can see them out and about. People can approach them and you don't feel intimidated to go up to them and ask a question.'* This view was reflected by Adam Dwight, the UCU Trade Union representative at the college – *'we see them more often so there's less of an ivory tower approach. They seem more willing to engage.'*

Many members of staff explained that senior leaders were effective in setting out their vision for the direction of the college. Hilary Peters, a Learning Support Co-ordinator said of the Principal *'you can see he has a clear vision and that enables people to be more engaged as you know exactly where the college is heading.'* Pam Causer, the Unison Trade Union Representative on the site emphasised this, saying that with the new senior leadership team, *'everyone here knows what's expected of them, where the college is going and how we're going to get there.'*

'People have understood that it's had to happen and why it's had to happen, and they've accepted it. They know that if we hadn't sorted our funding out, the college might not be here at all. People have understood that from the start.'

Pam Causer, Unison Rep

important - it's about working in a transparent organisation rather than it being all behind closed doors.' This openness was seen as helping ease the difficult process of change at the college. According to Glynis Partis, a Contract Operations Manager, *'if staff understand and see why a decision*

In addition to setting out their vision for the college, the openness and transparency of the senior leadership team is seen as being important for engaging staff, particularly given the changes the college is going through. Employees explained that they are given as much information as possible on the challenges facing the college, the situation it is in – including the financial details – and the progress it is making. As Caroline Snape, a Team Leader at the Student Hub said, *'it's really*

has been made, even if it's not what they would like – it might make their job harder or lead to cuts – but if they understand, they'll step up and do their best.'

Employees at City of Wolverhampton College exhibited a high degree of trust in the senior leadership team. Many commented that Mark and other senior leaders were always honest with staff, even about the difficult challenges facing the college and where things might have gone wrong. This tended to lead to trust both in the senior leaders and the direction in which they were taking the college. Adam Dwight the UCU representative explained that whereas in the past *'there's been a lot of spin, staff now feel that they are getting honest information on how the college is progressing.'*

Employees at City of Wolverhampton College were very positive about the way in which Mark and the senior leadership team communicated with them. The college uses a wide variety of communication channels to keep in touch with staff and encourage feedback and involvement.

Mark introduced all-staff meetings twice a term on both sites at which he sets out where they are as a college, the challenges they face and what they're doing to move forward. These are well-attended, highly interactive and offer employees the opportunity to raise issues and ask questions. In addition to this face-to-face contact, Mark sends out weekly email bulletins with the latest news. There is also a staff forum, known as the Learning Community, where employees from across the college meet with Mark and Karen O'Reilly the HR Director every half term, to discuss issues and obtain employee feedback.

'The college has undergone huge change in the last few years. The staff that are left are much more engaged than they were previously. The staff are much more focused – we know where we're going. We've got regular communication with senior management – mainly the Principal who has regular meetings with all staff. You can see he has clear vision and that enables people to be more engaged as you know exactly where the College is heading.'

Hilary Peters, Learning Support Co-ordinator

Communication at the college is seen as being particularly effective. In the latest staff survey, four in five employees rated it as good or very good. As Carol Smout, a Curriculum Manager explained, *'there is very fluent communication throughout – no matter what job role you do... everyone is valued. I think that's really important.'*

Involvement and partnership working

Beyond just communicating with employees, there is also a strong focus on employee involvement at City of Wolverhampton College. Kirk Hookham, a Curriculum Director described this approach, saying *'it's not "you will do" or one-way information. It's always discussion, dialogue and coming up with shared solutions.'*

There is a strong belief that employee involvement and consultation helps both engage staff and ensure better decisions making. As Kirk explained, *'at the end of the day, we've got around 600 staff with that many ideas every week, so it's a big mistake if we don't engage them in finding the solutions.'* The college regularly consults its staff and encourages them to offer their ideas. They have introduced a suggestions scheme for cost savings which allows staff to put forward their ideas to the senior managers. One such example that was picked up and implemented was to centralise the stationary orders which has helped reduce duplication and cost.

Employee involvement is supported by the strong partnership relationship between the unions and management at City of Wolverhampton College. Karen O'Reilly the HR Director explained how even through the difficult change process the college has experienced, *'the unions have worked with us, rather than against us, so it is a partnership.'* This was echoed by Pam Causer the Unison Representative who explained that *'when we do meet and when we negotiate changes, both sides are realistic about what the outcomes are going to be... At the end of the day, we've all got to cooperate to make sure the business thrives.'*

Management and the unions have worked together effectively on a number of difficult issues. They worked together to develop a new approach to lesson observations and have moved away from the use of zero hours contracts. There was a change of terms and conditions last year which, although difficult for employees, was supported by the unions as they understood the challenges the college faces.

There are a number of factors that help support the partnership relationship. There is regular contact between both sides – both formal meetings and informal chats – and the relationship is characterised by mutual openness and honesty. This has helped build trust; as Karen O'Reilly explained, *'they've got that trust with me, and the management team. That's all they really wanted – people to be honest with them so that they could represent their members fairly.'*

Crucially, there is an emphasis on meaningful involvement in decision-making. Employees and the union representative explained how the unions had been extensively involved throughout the change process that the college had been through. As Adam Dwight of UCU reflected, *'this isn't communicating with fait accomplis but actually genuinely wanting to negotiate... You feel like you've been part of the decision-making process. On behalf of my members, I feel that the college are taking our employment relationship seriously.'*

'We've been very clear, whenever we're looking to change any policies or make any major changes to the organisation, we always, always consult with the unions.'

Kirk Hookham, Curriculum Director

The strong focus on employee voice and partnership working at City of Wolverhampton College helps staff feel involved and engaged. *'I feel that our views and our voice are heard'* said one employee; with another explaining *'when you say something, you want to see some action – and that's very easily seen here.'* This sense of involvement also shows through in the staff survey in which four in five said they were regularly asked their opinion on work matters.

Values and DNA

City of Wolverhampton introduced the values – known as RAVES; Respect, Accountability, Vision, Empowerment and Student Focus – about a year ago. The values are seen to have had a significant impact on engagement. One employee explained how they now *'form the basis and the bedrock of everything, of what we're trying to achieve in the college.'* Another said that it was a *'turning point'* for the college – *'it was something all our staff could understand, could commit to and instead of us all going off in separate directions, it was something we were all focused on.'*

There are a number of ways in which the values are promoted and mainstreamed throughout the college. First, they form an important part of the recruitment process. Applicants are presented with the values and asked for their views on them as part of the shortlisting process.

Most importantly, the values are the basis of the college's appraisal system – known as the 'DNA'. As part of the DNA, employees are asked to think about the RAVES values, explain how they understand them and how their role contributes towards delivering them. As Glynis Partis, a Contracts Operations Manager explained, the DNA helps *'bring everything back to the core values of the college. You get to sit down with your manager and discuss objectives and targets and how they fit with those of the college. Staff can see how their day to day tasks contribute to our strategic aims, our objectives, values and mission as a college.'* The DNA, based on the RAVES values, helps create a clear line of sight from individual objectives, through team objectives, to the overall aims of the college. This is reflected in very strong performance on the staff survey which showed that 88 per cent of employees strongly agree that they support the college's values.

Having an engaged and motivated workforce is seen as central to the success of City of Wolverhampton College.

Many made the link between employee engagement and learning outcomes; as one explained; *'I think it's really important to get the staff engaged as otherwise the students won't progress as they should do or achieve to the best of their ability.'*

The City of Wolverhampton College has totally transformed employee perceptions following its poor Ofsted result two years ago. Mark Robertson and the senior leadership team have set a clear vision for the college and they have communicated openly and honestly, building trust and engagement. Employees are involved in decision-making and a strong partnership has developed with the college's trade unions. The college has developed and reinforced a strong sense of values that employees collectively buy in to.

The results are clear to see. City of Wolverhampton College was recently awarded the IIP Silver award having had its accreditation removed a few years ago. Employees talked about a transformation in terms of morale and engagement in the last year. In their last staff survey, 94 per cent of employees said they would recommend the college as a place to work with 98 per cent saying they were proud to work there. The improved levels of engagement have helped the college through some difficult changes, but it has turned around its financial position, transformed performance and reputation, and left it well set to succeed in the future.

Key Lessons:

- There needs to be effective and regular communication with front-line staff, including face-to-face contact with senior leaders and the chance to ask questions
- Senior leaders need to be open, honest and transparent, particularly when the college is facing difficult organisational change
- Employees must be given a voice and involved in decision making – an effective partnership relationship with trade unions can support this
- Having a coherent and explicit set of organisational values can help drive engagement, particularly when supported by an effective appraisal process.

College of North West London



The College of North West London is a further education institution based in the London Borough of Brent, and supports over 10,000 students.

The college has undergone significant change over a period of time, as it has had to make substantial saving. The last academic year saw four redundancy programmes of various sizes. However, since the appointment of a new Principal, Andy Cole, the college has been working to further improve the standard of services for its learners by better engaging with its employees.

Funding Crunch and Pace of Change

One of the main concerns for staff at the college has been the funding squeeze the college has faced. Levels of employee engagement in the last staff survey did appear to be high; with approximately 9 out of 10 employees saying that they understood and supported the strategic priorities of the institution and that they were clear about their individual priorities and targets. However, fewer employees - around 6 out of 10 - agreed that they were consulted about any changes and developments to the institution and that management valued their feedback.

As Jo Taylor, Head of HR and Staff Development at the college describes, *'last academic year saw four redundancy processes of various sizes'*. Since the recent spate of job losses at the college, concerns have been expressed about the current level of engagement amongst 'survivors'. As Jo puts it, *'the challenge for the college is to maintain the engagement levels amongst its employees with employees feeling part of the vision and values'*.

In support of this, since the appointment of a new Principal, Andy Cole, the college has been working towards establishing a new mission and set of values in an effort to build a 'strategic narrative' that could be cascaded throughout the organisation. New key performance indicators where employees' behaviours are linked to organisational values were introduced that reflected these. In order to ensure that employees buy in to this change and understand how to make it work for them, the senior management team have established wide-ranging forms of communication channels to make its employees aware of the change and how they could take an active role in realising it.

Role of Management and Communication during times of Change

Senior managers at the College of North West London understand the importance both of communicating effectively with employees, and involving them in the decision making process. Although the college has informal communication structures in place where employees can raise concerns about any changes the college might be undergoing, Andy Cole considers that more formal structures are required to help break down cultural barriers and negate individual biases and preferences found in informal structures of communication.

Currently, the college has various forms of communication systems in place for its employees including staff development days, an online suggestion box, drop in meetings with the Principal, regular bulletins and newsletters. The senior management team do encourage employees to take advantage of these opportunities and to speak up. As Jo Taylor described *'we have the tools out there... It would help if people see the change they have suggested and/or answers to questions they have asked. This will come over time'*.

The college has also seen a major restructuring in the management tier. There are now fewer line managers and there have been changes to their portfolios. The senior management team understand the crucial role line managers play in engaging their staff. Therefore, the institution has been investing in training to support, assist, enable and upskill their managers. As the Principal Andy Cole explained, *'line managers have to be engaged themselves in order to be engaging'*.

Benefits of an Engaged Workforce

The senior management team at College of North West London understand very well the benefits of an engaged workforce. For Grethe Woodward, a Director of Curriculum, the success of a specific course and the college itself depends on how engaged staff are.

However, she also makes an important observation that staff need to be made aware of the vital role they play in achieving this objective.

Anna Openshaw-Lawrence, the Vice Principal for People and Planning considers engagement to be a strategic priority for the college. There is recognition that an engaged workforce would be more interested in both the long and short-term vision of the organisation and be able to deliver better services for their students, which in turn could have knock on effects on student success rates at the college.

'They can come in and make a difference to student's lives, the community, and their peer group. That is what having an engaged college is all about. That people know that everything they do will make a difference'.

Jo Taylor, Head of HR and Staff Development

Barriers to Engagement

Despite the benefits of an engaged workforce, the senior management team at the College of North West London recognise that achieving and maintaining consistent levels of engagement amongst their workforce is not a simple task. As with most colleges, funding cuts and the resultant staff redundancies has undermined the sense of security amongst some employees. However, employees understand well the challenges facing the college and there are effective communication mechanisms that allow them to have a say. For the Vice-Principal for People and Planning, the immediate concern is the volume of change that has been happening at the college, which risks undermining engagement amongst the employees. Although she recognises that some large scale restructuring had taken place at the college recently, the institution recognises the fact that constant change could be disruptive for the day-to-day activities, and also can increase feelings of insecurity amongst the staff. Therefore, the college always strives to minimise the amount and pace of change, and to support staff as much as possible throughout.

Despite significant changes due to cuts to funding, the College of North West London has been trying to engage with its workforce by constantly communicating with them and making them a part of the decision making process. The senior management team at the college both understand the benefits of an engaged workforce and recognise that there are obstacles to achieving and sustaining optimum levels of engagement at the college, especially during and after a period of redundancies. However, with a new Principal, Andy Cole at the helm, the college is working towards a new set of values and objectives, while also trying to link employees' behaviours to organisational values with their new key performance indicators. To make this change process a success and encourage employee buy in, the senior management team are not only constantly communicating the strategic narrative to their employees, but also investing in the training of line managers who in turn could help employees understand the importance of the change and make them part of the decision making process.

Key Lessons:

- Colleges need to provide a wide variety of communication channels, promote awareness of them and encourage staff to use them
- A strategic narrative that is consistent needs to be cascaded down to employees from the leadership team
- Line managers are crucial to engaging with frontline employees – but they themselves need to be engaged and supported.

Gloucestershire College educates almost 20,000 students a year and supports over 1,200 local employers, based in and around Gloucester, Cheltenham and the Forest of Dean.

The college is rated as good by Ofsted, and engaging effectively with its 800 strong workforce is seen as crucial in further driving up standards and improving outcomes for learners. Their recently agreed Strategic Plan acknowledges the need to *'invest in staff and raise levels of staff engagement.'* Gloucestershire College's Principal Matthew Burgess emphasised this saying *'if we're going to be successful, we need high performing teams... It's about having trust, it's about people feeling able to have their opinion heard. It's about getting commitment and involvement – you have to engage with people to do that. People need to feel that they are valued, respected and have a contribution to make.'*

Involvement, empowerment and ownership

Managers at Gloucestershire College understand the importance of involving and empowering staff. There has been an effort to change the culture at the college, which Matthew Burgess characterised as having been *'quite a centralised, command and control model.'* He and the senior leadership team are trying to replace this with an approach which gives employees and teams control and responsibility in their own areas, allowing them to solve challenges and make changes themselves. The rationale behind this is that it will both help improve engagement and enable better decision-making.

'You know that people nearer to the challenges, on the coalface, are going to know much better than people from a distance'

Matthew Burgess, Principal

Employees recognised and tended to appreciate this change in approach. A member of the Faculty Support team explained that previously, when he had an idea to improve ways of working or save money, *'I had to go from my silo, up to some forum to make a decision, then it would bounce around for a while and nothing would ever happen. You'd never get change, the only change that did happen would just come down, it would be imposed.'* Now however, he felt more able to make change happen – *'I think it's good for continuous improvement.'* A lecturer explained how, having previously taught in Finland, she had been shocked by how comparatively difficult it was for frontline employees to make things happen. In the last year though, she had seen a significant change – *'people feel that they have more of a say in the way things are run.'*

Engaging through change

This approach has been evident in the way the college has managed the change process in the last year. As with many colleges, Gloucestershire has been through difficult times recently, having to reduce its payroll by £3.5m due to cuts in its funding.

There was a determination to involve staff fully in the change process and to ensure that it did not undermine employee engagement. As Matthew Burgess explained, they invested a lot of time and effort before the process started in preparing people; *'we did an unprecedented series of meetings where we stopped teaching and just met with every member of staff.'* They discussed with staff – in both whole college meetings and smaller team meetings – the strategic direction of the college, their values, the

challenges they faced and what they thought the solutions might be. Managers were encouraged and supported to have conversations with their team about the process. There was also a survey of employees on the change process allowing them to feed in their ideas.

Although this process involved a significant time commitment, it was seen as important in protecting and building employee engagement. The Principal believes that if they had just gone to staff with proposals and pushed them through *'things would've been very different, rather than taking the time to say "this is where we are, these are some of the options, we could consider, what else could we do, are we missing something" that's a different conversation.'* Sharon Parkin, Director of HR echoed this, saying *'it's really important to have staff involved... if you can get people involved, they'll accept it far more.'*

'There was a feeling that we're all in it together. You got the feeling they were managing it as best as possible. They've given us much more information, we feel like we're trusted with that information and kept informed.'

Although this process has been challenging, employees seemed very positive about how it had been handled. This is also demonstrated in their staff survey. Three in five employees (59 per cent) agree they are given enough information on why change needs to happen, 14 per cent higher than the external benchmark figure. They also score significantly higher on those who agree that management consults on major change – a figure which has increased on last year.

Partnership working

One factor supporting the change process was the effective partnership relationship with the trade unions. Senior managers, employees and the union representatives all commented on how positive the relationship was. As Sharon Parkin, HR Director at Gloucestershire College explained, the relationship is based on a shared understanding of their common interests; *'we both start from the same perspective which is that we're here to do the best thing for staff.'* Karen Morris, the UCU Representative at Gloucestershire also described the relationship as strong and positive *'but there's still a sense of challenge. It's not cosy and there's not an easy ride for each side.... there is challenge and I think that's important.'*

The strong partnership relationship – built over a number of years – has been particularly important through the difficult change the college has recently been through. The unions were extensively involved in the change process. Management and trade union representatives met on a daily basis, sometimes just briefly, to ensure both sides were up to speed and aware of any developing issues. As Karen Morris explained, *'there was a real emphasis on us bringing concerns, worries and issues to the table... We knew we were thoroughly involved from the outset and we had everything presented to us.'*

Senior Leadership

There is a relatively new management team at Gloucestershire College, led by the Principal, Matthew Burgess. They are clear that employee engagement is a priority at the trust.

'My role is to set out that actually I think staff engagement is important – and I've repeated that many times – I think we're only going to be successful if we take the staff with us and they invest in the process.'

Senior managers were seen as being highly visible across the College. There was a conscious effort on behalf of senior managers to have regular face-to-face contact with employees. Sharon Parkin, the Director of HR described how she blocked out time in her diary on a weekly basis to join staff in lessons; *'it's actually going out to talk to staff – that's the most important bit of it.'* Employees regularly mentioned this as being a positive change, with one saying *'there's much more of them showing their faces around, they're more approachable and they're out and about – I think that's important.'* They also

Matthew Burgess, Principal

tended to appreciate the extent to which senior managers were willing to share information openly and honestly with them – even around difficult issues. **Values**

In the last year there has been an effort to develop a set of common values at the college. There was a recognition that this might have been lacking in the past. Sharon Parkin explained that *'if you went to people previously and asked "what are the college values?", they wouldn't know.'*

The college values, introduced in January this year, were developed with staff. They are seen as playing an important role in employee engagement. As Matt Burgess described, the values help set out the direction for the college and allow employees to *'make sense of their contribution to the bigger goal.'* They are also seen as important in helping the college through change and allowing employees to challenge behaviour that isn't seen as living out the values. Following their development, the values have been communicated clearly to employees and they now form part of the recruitment process.

Gloucestershire College has been successful in preserving employee engagement during difficult times. Employees were extensively involved in the change process, and there is a strong focus on empowerment and ownership at the college. The leaders are seen as highly visible and trusted, and there is a close partnership relationship with the trade unions. Three in five employees say they would recommend the college to others as a place to work – significantly higher than the external benchmark. The college was recently recognised by Investors in People, achieving a gold accreditation. As one employee commented, *'I do feel very engaged with the college. I think we've pulled together in a way that we hadn't before.'*

Key Lessons:

- Employees need to be empowered and given ownership so that they can identify solutions to challenges they face, and make changes and improvements
- Employees need to be involved in organisational change in order to ensure they have buy-in to the process
- Trade unions, working in partnership but providing effective challenge, can support change and employee engagement
- Senior leaders need to understand the importance of employee engagement and make it a top priority
- Employees need to understand the College's values and their role in delivering College objectives.

Hull College provides a wide variety of further and higher education courses to 30,000 learners based in and around Hull. It is graded as outstanding by Ofsted across every area.

The college recognises the importance of employee engagement. As well as aiming to be the best performing and most innovative college in the country, they aspire to be the best college to work for. One of their six strategic objectives is to *'promote and embed shared values creating high performance and a culture of responsibility and trust.'*

Challenges and change

As with all further education colleges, the funding reductions in the sector are posing a significant challenge and requiring substantial change. For Gary Warke the Chief Executive of Hull College Group, involving staff in the process is a priority; *'it's about getting people's buy-in to change and about thinking about working differently in the future.'*

Ensuring effective communication at all levels across the college is seen as important in supporting employee engagement. Hull College uses a wide variety of communication channels to get staff views and communicate key messages back to them. Senior leaders are keen to support employee-led innovation. As Gary Warke explained, *'we need to try and capture lots of ideas that are coming from staff – on how we're doing things and on how we can improve the business.'* They have recently set up Staff Voice, a series of forums for employees across the organisation that meet regularly to get the views and ideas of staff, to support communications and to deal with some of the *'hygiene factors'*.

The Rich Picture

Hull College has adopted an innovative approach to supporting change and engaging staff with their strategic narrative.

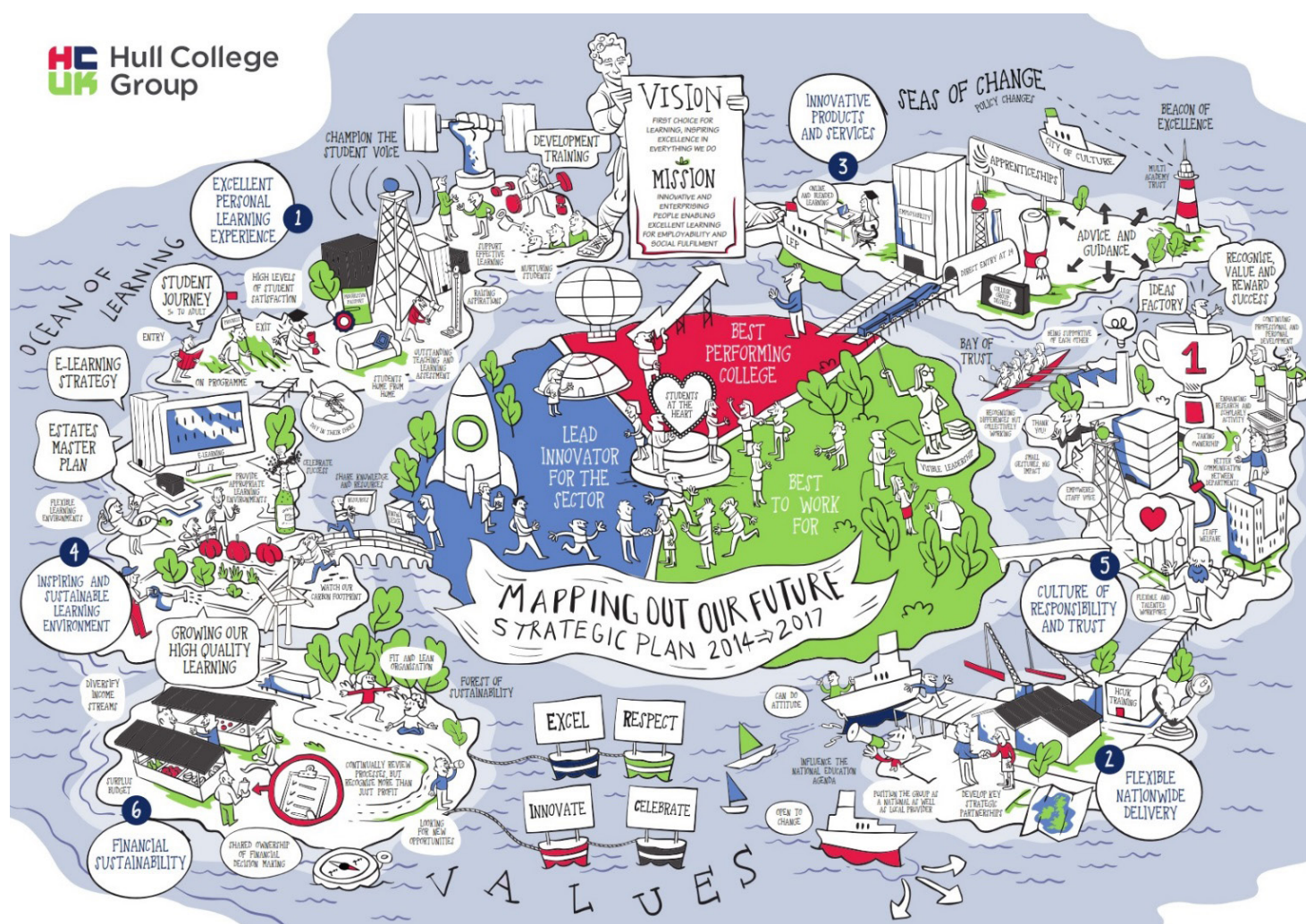
As Jane Spencer, Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development at Hull College described, although there was strong sense of the strategic plan and where the college was going at a senior level, there was a feeling that this needed to be supported at all levels throughout the workforce. In order to do this, the college has developed what they call the 'Rich Picture'. This is a visual representation in the form of a large cartoon-style poster, of the college's aim, vision and values, as well as its six strategic objectives.

The Rich Picture is being rolled out across the college. It will be introduced to all staff in discussion groups to help them better understand the strategic narrative of the college. These sessions will also invite employees to offer their views and think about how their individual and team objectives help contribute to the overall success of the college.

'It's about how you take that strategic narrative – the values, vision and mission – and how you make sense of that individually and at a departmental level, so it means we've got some flow from individual objectives that feed back in to that.'

*Jane Spencer, Director of
Organisational Development*

Jane Spencer sees the Rich Picture as important in helping bring the college's strategic narrative to life; 'as they say, a picture tells a thousand words... if you have the Rich Picture, it just allows for that consistency of message and discussion, so ultimately we're all heading in the right direction.' Gary Warke echoed this, saying that by converting the strategic plan into something that is 'visually engaging and accessible, with the opportunity to engage a large group of staff, the Rich Picture makes it more tangible to the organisation.'



Leaders and managers

Both senior leaders and line managers are seen as playing an important role in supporting employee engagement at Hull College.

The senior leadership team at Hull College saw their role in engaging employees as clearly setting out a direction and vision, and involving staff in the process of change.

To aid this, there was an emphasis on ensuring that the senior leadership team are visible and accessible across the trust. As Gary Warke explained, given the college is going through a period of substantial change, 'the senior team will be accessible to staff at every site in a planned way; no daft questions, no holds barred, staff can say things they want to say, to hold the senior team to account; they can offer suggestions for progress and things we might want to do differently. Giving staff the opportunity to hear that rationale in words, directly from a senior leader's mouth, and answer their questions and concerns is really important. It's trying to engage with staff in a human way.'

'It's pivotal that ensuring that through the organisational change and the reshaping of the business, the whole organisation gets a sense of where we're taking the group.'

Lee Probert, Chief Operating Officer

Leaders and managers

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In addition to the role for senior leaders, middle and line managers are seen as being absolutely critical to engaging effectively with staff at Hull College. According to Gary Warke, although he and colleagues did their best to engage directly with employees *'ultimately we're not engaging with them every single day in the way that their line managers and supervisors do.'* Lee Probert emphasised this, saying that the frontline managers *'are the key across the group. Without their buy-in and their engagement, their support with delivery, none of this will happen.'*

Despite the significant challenges facing the sector, Hull College has managed to maintain relatively strong levels of employee engagement. This has helped them continue both to maintain high quality teaching and learning, and improve results for learners. Through developing their Rich Picture, the college is managing to engage staff with the strategic narrative.

Key Lessons:

- Colleges need to see engaging with their employees as a top priority
- Colleges should have a clear strategic narrative which employees understand and buy-in to – a visual depiction of this can help
- Leaders need to be visible and accessible, particularly during time of change.

Queen Alexandra College



Queen Alexandra College (QAC) is an independent specialist college of further education based in Harborne, Birmingham and serves around 170 students with visual impairment and other disabilities.

Previous staff survey results had shown that engagement amongst employees was low, and that communication systems between management and staff were not fully effective. Although turnover rates at the college have been minimal (5 per cent), there was evidence that the college needed to think about how various staff groups could work with each other and the management team in order to increase transparency and build trust.

Building Values

The college had recently re-assessed their values and put forward a strategic plan for the next three years with the aim of linking employee objectives to organisational values. The new values state that “all members of staff, volunteers, students and service providers of QAC are entitled to equality of rights and opportunities and have the same responsibility to respect and treat people with dignity regardless of their differences”. These were drawn up through extensive consultation with more than 200 employees taking part and suggesting how they could be embedded into the organisation. Although it took some time to implement the new set of values, their roll out and follow up implementation has been considered a success due to active employee participation. Students had a parallel programme of values based activity, that further embedded them into employees day to day work as they were integrated into teaching activity.

The Principal of Queen Alexandra College, Hugh Williams and Director of HR and Estates Vicky Waldron believe that these values helped different departments of the college, some of them based off campus, feel part of the institution and got them more engaged with the activities of the institution. As Vicky Waldron describes, *“we have an enterprise division which is lots of different businesses, many of them off the campus. It's very hard for them to feel part of the college because it's different work. We are trying to address this and build a sense of one-ness from all the different parts of the college”*. It has also helped to build a ‘common identity’ amongst employees and encouraged them to think about how they could embed the values of the college into their own roles. To promote employee behaviours that are consistent with the values of the institution, the college also rewards staff who demonstrate them in their day to day activities. However, Vicky Waldron, Director of HR and Estates, thinks there is a lot more work to be done as current values need refinement to reflect the ones important to their staff. Another challenge she describes is to successfully embed the new policies within the organisation and cascade them into their recruitment and performance management strategies so the values are reinforced in many different ways.

Enhancing Engagement amongst Staff

Vicky Waldron says that the college’s effort to embed their new set of values into organisational functioning will also help increase engagement amongst its employees, especially since the management team actively sought the opinions and ideas of their employees during the process. However, she agrees that there is much work to be done in the area as past employee surveys showed that engagement levels varied across various groups of the college, with some departments reporting higher engagement scores than others. The college also actively tries to involve staff in the decision making process, by explaining changes before they happen, seeking their ideas and

suggestions and reporting back on any developments. Hugh Williams, Principal of Queen Alexandra College, believes that the organisation put policies in place to engage with their managers but similar policies hadn't been cascaded down to rest of the employees.

Although turnover rates at the Queen Alexandra college have been historically low with many employees serving at the institution until retirement age, Vicky Waldron, Director of HR and Estates, believes that the college could still benefit from increasing commitment from employees. The senior leadership have identified a possible challenge to enhancing levels of engagement and are taking steps to address it. Whereas the college previously just supported students with visual impairments, in the last few years they have diversified and they now work with students with a range of disabilities. This has posed a challenge to some employees who have had to adjust to the varying needs of the students. To avoid this from becoming a barrier to engagement, Hugh and Vicky are trying to build a collaborative atmosphere at the college by listening to their employees, giving feedback and constantly working on refining, strengthening and cascading values that are important to the college to improve outcomes for students.

Key Lessons:

- Building an agreed set of college values can help staff feel more engaged with the organisation
- Staff need to have a say in the development of college values, and they need to be mainstreamed throughout the organisation
- Employees need to be supported through change, and given a voice.

7

Building employee engagement in further education

As we have shown above, levels of employee engagement in further education are mixed. Employees appear highly engaged with their job and vocation but far less so with their college. We have also identified some of the positive outcomes associated with employee engagement. But what can colleges do to engage more effectively with their employees? Below, we set out three key areas for colleges to focus on, based on the academic evidence, the case studies and the expert interviews, before going on to examine the role of employee engagement in organisational change.

1. Leadership and Management

Both senior leaders and line managers seem to play an important role in supporting employee engagement in colleges.

Senior Leaders

First, let us take the role of Principals and senior leaders. The role of leaders in engaging staff was a strong theme coming out of both the literature review, the expert interviews and the case studies.

This reflects the findings of the MacLeod Report which identified senior leaders as having a crucial role in setting out the 'strategic narrative' for the organisation, and in promoting a sense of integrity.²⁶ This also reflects previous IPA research on employee engagement in the NHS which found that senior leaders play a fundamental role in employee engagement and that they need to set the tone at the top of the organisation, be visible and approachable, and ensure there is regular and effective communication with employees.²⁷

So how does the sector perform in this area? QDP Services asked staff from 35 FE providers about leadership at their college. On the plus side, two thirds (65 per cent) of employees agreed that the Principal promoted a culture of excellence at their college. However, under half agreed that senior managers provided clear direction and leadership (45 per cent) or managed the organisation effectively (43 per cent).

Sir Bernard O'Connell, the former Principal at Runshaw College, argues that too many Principals have adopted a 'command and control' style of leadership that led to some becoming 'control freaks, pouring down initiative overloads and ill-thought out control systems on middle managers and staff, distracting them from what was really important - teaching and learning.' This, he claims, often leads to resistance to change, cynicism demotivation and a climate of fear and blame. Instead, he argues that colleges need to adopt a 'transformational leadership' with a focus on positive feedback and helping staff feel valued.²⁸

So what do senior managers need to do to support employee engagement? First, employee engagement needs to be seen as a high-level **strategic priority**. Given the evidence of the importance of engagement, this should be uncontroversial. Principals and senior leaders at case study colleges

²⁶ Clarke and MacLeod, *Engaging for Success*, p. 75

²⁷ Joe Dromey, *Meeting the Challenge – Successful employee engagement in the NHS*, IPA, 2014, p. 14 -15

²⁸ *Some Colleges accused of false promises and dubious ethics*, Times Education Supplement, 26/06/09

teaching and learning. But it seems that this is not necessarily the case across the sector. As Jacqui Gerrard the Chair of Governors at Strode's College explained, *'most organisations I'd go into in to had never heard of the term engagement relating to employees. Many had been doing satisfaction surveys – it was all about making staff happy, rather than having staff engaged in their working environment.'* Leaders need to be explicit about the importance of employee engagement, set out why it matters, and make sure the college measures and acts on engagement.

Secondly, senior leaders need to ensure that they **communicate effectively** with the workforce. At the case study colleges, Principals tended to have regular communication with frontline staff, both through email bulletins and face-to-face, at team or whole-college meetings. Employees often emphasised effective communication as being important to employee engagement, particularly when Principals were open and honest about the challenges facing colleges. However, QDP survey results²⁹ show that there is definitely room for improvement here, with only one in three (33 per cent) employees saying that existing communication systems at their colleges were effective and only two in five employees (41 per cent) reporting that management consults them before any major change event.

In communicating with their workforce, senior leaders have an important role to play in setting the narrative, particularly during times of change. As the Institute for Learning found, *'leadership and management have a big role to play here in translating the government agenda into achievable outcomes.'*³⁰ Christine Lewis, National Officer for FE at Unison, argued that leaders should *'at a local, workplace level, inculcate that feeling that we're all in it together.'*

Finally, senior leaders need to be highly **visible** across their college. As Joy Mercer of the AoC explained, in the best colleges *'there is a clear presence of the leadership'*, with leaders being regularly in touch with both students and staff and avoiding the temptation to *'hide in the office.'*

There are a number of reasons why this was seen as important. First, being visible across the college helps managers appear more approachable. Secondly, it was felt that visibility and approachability helped build trust in senior leaders. Finally, having leaders in-touch with the front line and closer to employees also helps them in *'understanding the real constraints faced by staff and considering how these constraints can be eased and improved.'*³¹

'(Senior managers must be) accessible, you don't just stay in your ivory tower... If you just walk around and know people's names. It sounds like nothing, but it's big. It's about understanding what motivates people.'

Christine Lewis, Unison

Line Managers

While senior managers set the tone at the top of the college, line managers also play a fundamental role in engaging employees in further education.

The role of managers in employee engagement was recognised in the MacLeod report. It argued that in order for there to be high levels of engagement in an organisation, there must be *'engaging managers who offer clarity, appreciation of employees' effort and contribution, who treat their people as individuals and who ensure that work is organised effectively and efficiently so that employees feel they are valued, and equipped and supported to do their job.'*³² As Andy Cole, the Principal of College of North West London explained, *"line managers have to be engaged themselves in order to be engaging"*.

Current performance here again shows there is significant room for improvement. In their survey of UCU members in FE, Kinman and Wray found that just two in five say that their manager encourages them at work (42.5 per cent) and can always or often be relied upon to help out with a work problem (39.4 per cent), whereas just one in five say their manager always or often gives supportive feedback

29 Data provided with thanks by QDP Services - www.qdp-services.co.uk

30 *Employee Perceptions of Further Education*, p. 83

31 *Employee Perceptions of Further Education*, p. 84

32 Clarke and MacLeod, *Engaging for Success*, p. 31

on their work (21.5 per cent) or supports them through emotionally demanding work (20.5 per cent). In the area of manager support, UCU members in FE scored an average of 2.97 out of 5, compared to a national benchmark of 3.77, one of the biggest ‘*wellbeing gaps*’ in the sector.³³ Recent data from QPD Services was somewhat more positive. When asked whether employees felt valued and received good support from their line manager, three in five employees responded positively (62 per cent) and a similar number said that their manager kept them well informed of any developments in the organisation (64 per cent).

‘They’re absolutely crucial in terms of how you impart the culture, but also because they’re the regular contact between individual staff and “the management”.’

Joy Mercer, Head of Education Policy, AoC

Line managers have a number of roles to play in engaging with their staff. First, they need to ensure that employees are supported and effectively **performance managed**. Evidence from the NHS shows that employees who have had a high quality appraisal – in which performance is discussed, targets are set and support identified – have significantly higher levels of engagement.³⁴ Case study colleges tended to place great importance on the appraisal process. This was particularly strong at the City of Wolverhampton College where the appraisal – known as the DNA – is based on the college’s values and helps employees both reflect on their performance and identify areas for development. There is evidence to suggest that the sector as a whole has some way to go in this area though. According to QPD Services, whereas three quarters of employees (76 per cent) participate in an appraisal process, just half (53 per cent) say that their reviews lead to positive actions.

Secondly, line managers need to support effective **team working**. Again, evidence from the NHS shows that effective team working is correlated with high levels of employee engagement. Effective team working is defined as having clear objectives, working closely together to meet the objectives and meeting regularly to discuss team effectiveness and how it can be improved.³⁵ Employees at the case study colleges emphasised the importance of team working, particularly having regular team meetings that allowed people to share information and ideas and assess performance. Evidence suggests that team working is relatively strong in FE, with Newcastle Business School finding ‘*relatively high levels of satisfaction... regarding staff working in teams and staff commitment to quality improvement.*’³⁶

Finally, line managers need as much as possible to **manage and reduce pressures** on their teams. The Institute for Learning highlight the need to ‘*improve the efficiency of management practices to develop more business-like organisations that will help to ease some aspects of a pressurised workload and reduce the cumbersome nature of many processes.*’³⁷

2. Communication and employee voice

The second factor we identified as being important in building employee engagement at colleges is having effective communication and a strong and robust employee voice.

There is a wealth of evidence around the importance of employee voice to engagement. Clarke and MacLeod identified employee voice as one of the four enablers of employee engagement. They define voice as follows ‘*employees’ views are sought out; they are listened to and see that their opinions count and make a difference. They speak out and challenge when appropriate. A strong sense of listening and responsiveness permeates the organisation, enabled by effective communication.*’³⁸ Davies and Owen found that in further education, one of the two factors most strongly linked to job satisfaction was ‘*how effectively staff were communicated with, consulted and involved in the decision-making process.*’ They also argued that if there was not effective communication with staff ‘*this appeared to cloud their*

33 Kinman and Wray, *Further Stress*, p. 16-17

34 West and Dawson, *Employee Engagement and NHS Performance* p. 16

35 West and Dawson, *Employee Engagement and NHS Performance* p. 13

36 Robson et al, *Does quality drive employee satisfaction in the UK learning sector*, p. 13

37 *Employee Perceptions of Further Education*, p. 11

38 Clarke and MacLeod, *Engaging for Success*, p. 75

*overall attitudes to their job and employer.'*³⁹

There is lots of evidence around how colleges are currently performing in this area, and performance seems to be mixed. The QDP survey⁴⁰ showed that only one in three employees (33 per cent) thought that communication mechanisms within their colleges were effective. Employees also tended to rate inter-departmental communication and the sharing of best practice between departments relatively poorly.

Additionally, as mentioned above, Newcastle Business School found that communication was one of two areas where there were 'particularly low levels of staff satisfaction.' Better communication was the most often cited action that employees in FE thought could help to improve working lives, even ahead of increased resources (although this was in 2005 before the recent squeeze on resources began). However, while communications were not seen as effective, employees tended to be more satisfied with the extent to which their views are sought and considered, as well as involvement in planning improvements and setting targets.⁴¹

In terms of job control, Kinman and Wray found that most UCU members in FE (59.2 per cent) feel they always or often have some say over the way they work. However, only one in five (21.3 per cent) said they always or often have a choice in deciding how they do their work. They found that the sector seemed to have lower levels of job control (2.92 out of 5) compared to the national benchmark (3.32), and that this gap had '*widened considerably, highlighting particular problems in this area.*'⁴²

Ensuring effective **communications** is crucial to engaging with employees in FE. The Institute for Government recommend that colleges looking to build an informed and engaged workforce must invest in this area and '*audit and improve internal communication strategies to encourage two-way vertical communications.*'⁴³ There was a clear focus on communications in the case study colleges, with colleges sharing information openly with employees about the context in which they operate and the challenges they collectively face. This included regular email bulletins from the Principal, as well as face-to-face briefings from both senior leaders and line managers. However, it is also important to recognise that good communication requires a receptive audience that are listening; employees need to be ready to listen to managers and to give them a fair hearing.

Beyond just communicating with staff, it is vital to promote a strong sense of **employee voice**. Employees need to be able to give their views, raise concerns and provide suggestions for better ways of working.

The colleges visited as part of this research had a variety of channels through which they could encourage and promote employee voice. Most held regular whole college meetings, led by the Principal, at which there was ample opportunity to raise questions and offer suggestions. Given the size of some colleges, their geographical locations and the pressure on timetables, the logistics of these meetings can be difficult. However, we found that such meetings were highly valued by employees in terms of understanding the direction of the college and allowing them to feed in.

It is crucial that all such meetings allow time for employee inputs though; recent IPA research found that whereas such whole team meetings were correlated with higher levels of employee engagement, where there were team meetings with no opportunities for employees to input, engagement was actually lower than where there were no such meetings at all.⁴⁴

In addition to the whole college meetings, smaller school, department, or team meetings were also seen as important in giving employees a voice and helping build engagement and team spirit. Appraisals also played a role here. In addition to allowing managers and employees to assess

39 Peter Davies and Jane Owen, *Listening to Staff*, Learning and Skills Development Agency, 2001, p. 7

40 Data provided with thanks by QDP Services - www.qdp-services.co.uk

41 Robson et al, *Does quality drive employee satisfaction in the UK learning sector*, p. 17

42 Kinman and Wray, *Further Stress*, p. 14 - 15

43 *Employee Perceptions of Further Education*, p. 11

44 Joe Dromey, *MacLeod and Clarke's Concept of Employee Engagement: An Analysis based on the Workplace Employee Relations Study*, ACAS, 2013 p. 30

performance, case study colleges used them as an opportunity to get feedback from employees on team performance and the organisation as a whole.

There is also evidence that staff forums can be effective in supporting employee voice and engagement. Staff forums need to be representative of the college as a whole, they need to deal with strategic issues – rather than just ‘tea and toilets’ concerns – and their work needs to be disseminated and acted on. As Mark Rhodes of Strode’s college explained, staff forums *‘shouldn’t be there as talking shops or listening machines, they need to be there actually to affect what’s happening in the college, to change things and drive improvements.’*

Staff surveys also provide a useful way of promoting employee voice. There is currently no standardised sector-wide survey on employee perceptions in further education. However, many colleges do undertake regular employee surveys, either internally or commissioned from an external provider. Employee surveys provide an invaluable tool in understanding levels of engagement in colleges, how they vary across time and across the organisation (for example between different groups of employees or departments) and the drivers of engagement on a college level.

‘It’s not a case of finding views out and then never doing anything about it because that really annoys people when it happens.’

Joy Mercer, Head of Education Policy, AoC

Beyond simply having a staff survey, colleges need to ensure that they carefully consider, communicate and act on the findings, with actions taken being fed-back to employees. This is important with other forms of consultation too. Asking employee opinions annually but not feeding back on or acting on concerns can actually increase cynicism and undermine engagement. However, data from QDP Services shows that only two in five employees (43 per cent) felt that their feedback was valued by the management.

‘I don’t regard employee engagement as a phenomenon that is alternative to engaging with trade unions. Engaging with trade unions is employee engagement.’

Andrew Harden, Head of Further Education, UCU

For colleges, having a positive relationship with the **trade unions** can help support both employee voice and engagement. The national officers and local trade union reps at case study colleges saw trade unions as playing an important role as being independent, trusted and authoritative representatives of employee voice.

Despite conflict at a national level over funding cuts and changes in FE, many colleges still have strong partnership relationships with the trade unions on a local basis. As Andrew Harden argued, there are many cases where there continue to be good relationships, as both sides had not allowed *‘national issues to pollute things locally.’*

At case study colleges, there had been an effort to separate the national from the local situation, with both sides looking to make the best of things on the ground and a spirit that both sides were in the situation together. Managers and union representatives identified a number of factors in supporting effective partnership working. First, both sides need to recognise the importance of working together and the shared interests of supporting the effective running of the college. Second, there needs to be a willingness on both sides genuinely to negotiate. For colleges, this means allowing the unions input into the decision-making process at an early stage so they can be properly involved in the process. For trade unions, this means engaging with change when it is necessary and supporting their members to do so too, rather than just opposing it. Having regular contact between both unions and management – on a formal and informal basis – was also seen as important in building trusted personal relationships and a sense of partnership.

Empowerment

As well as encouraging and enabling employees to offer their views, colleges need to support a culture

of empowerment and control where people are able to actively make improvements happen.

As we have seen, there is some room for improvement in FE here. Employees in colleges score below the national benchmark figure in terms of job control, and the gap has widened in recent years.⁴⁵

Davies and Owen have argued that colleges need to ensure there is an *'embedded culture of continuous improvement... which encouraged bottom-up initiatives within a clearly understood framework.'*⁴⁶ Joy Mercer of AoC echoed this, saying colleges need to *'embed change as normal'*, and that senior teams need to *'liberate their staff to get on with what they know how to do. In the best colleges, micro-management doesn't work. It's about saying "we've agreed the values, now you go ahead and deliver on that".'*

At case study colleges, a culture of continuous improvement was encouraged. There were discussions about challenges and potential solutions at a team level, in appraisals, and in ad hoc groups formed on particular issues. Changes made as a result of employee suggestions were fed-back to ensure employees saw the impact of these changes.

3. Values and the strategic narrative

The third factor we found to be important in supporting employee engagement in colleges is having a strong set of values and strategic narrative. The MacLeod Report identified the 'strategic narrative' as one of the four enablers of employee engagement. It defined this as having *'a strong, transparent and explicit organisational culture which gives employees a line of sight between their job and the vision and aims of the organisation.'*⁴⁷

One might assume that this would be relatively straight-forward for colleges, as they have a clear social purpose. However, evidence from Kinman and Wray's survey of UCU members in FE shows some cause for concern in this area. While the majority of employees (69.5 per cent) said they were always or often clear about what is expected of them at work, just one in seven (14.7 per cent) said they always or often understood how their role fits into the overall aim of the organisation.⁴⁸ Again, this seems to reflect a divorce between employees' opinions about their role, and their organisation, with the latter being seen in a far less positive light.

It is vital that organisational values, aims and objectives explicitly focus on the quality of teaching and learning as the primary objective. As explained above, employees in FE tend to be driven by altruistic motivations – to help learners improve their skills, achieve their potential and progress in their lives. Given this strong vocational purpose, colleges too must be clear about their social purpose, and how they aim to make a difference for learners. If this is not the case, there can be a disconnect between individual and organisational aims, which can cause friction and undermine engagement. Some interviewees for example expressed concern about seeing FE as a 'business' rather than a service.

Research into employee engagement in the NHS found that having a strong set of organisational values was a key factor in building employee engagement. In best practice examples, these organisational values were developed by employees themselves, rather than by senior managers. This ensured they were seen as genuine, and that employees were able to buy-in to them.⁴⁹ In terms of developing organisational values, As Joy Mercer of the AoC noted, colleges rated good or outstanding by Ofsted tend to have *'a very clearly articulated culture in the college and that they manage, embed and disseminate that from the bottom-up.'* However, QDP Services evidence showed that only three in five employees (62 per cent) were aware of their organisation's stated values.

The case study colleges tended to be very strong at explaining their values, aims and objectives, and

45 Kinman and Wray, *Further Stress*, p. 6

46 Davies and Owen, *Listening to Staff*, p. 7

47 Clarke and MacLeod, *Engaging for Success*, p. 31

48 Kinman and Wray, *Further Stress*, p. 22 – 23

49 Dromey, *Meeting the Challenge*, p. 11 – 12

in helping employees buy-into and identify with these. Most had developed a set of college values which were consistently communicated to staff. At City of Wolverhampton College for example, the values form part of the recruitment process as well as the basis of the appraisal process, with employees asked to explain what the values mean to them and how they have demonstrated them in their work. At Hull College, they had developed what they described as the Rich Picture. This was a large, cartoon-style poster that depicts the college's aim, vision, values and strategic objectives. This is being introduced to employees across the college in group discussions, helping them to develop a better understanding of where the college is going, and think about the role – individually and in their team – in getting there.

As we shall see below, having a clear set of values and a well-understood strategic narrative is particularly important during times of change.

8

Engagement and Organisational Change

Having considered the levels of employee engagement in the further education sector, we now go on to examine engagement and change. Below, we consider how ready the FE workplace is for change, the importance of engagement during change, the challenges change poses, and successful approaches to engaging employees during change.

Readiness for change

There is a huge amount of change going on in the FE sector at the moment. The primary driver for this change is the reduction in funding available to colleges as a result of Government cuts. With the Coalition having protected the under-16 budget, further education has been disproportionately hit.

This poses significant challenges for colleges and for the workforce. As labour costs make up a substantial part of a college's budget (on average 63 per cent), the cuts will inevitably have an impact on employees. Funding reductions have forced most colleges to undertake substantial reviews and reorganisations in an effort to cut costs. Joy Mercer of the AoC echoed this, saying there was a risk of 'restructure disease' hitting staff morale.

'(There is) relentless change going on in FE at the moment, it's almost like we're facing an annual restructure scenario.'

Andrew Harden, Head of Further Education, UCU

In terms of the readiness for change among colleges and the workforce, the picture seems to be mixed. On the positive side, there is a clear understanding among most employees of the pressing need for change. Employees at the case study colleges clearly understood the financial context in which colleges were operating therefore demonstrating the importance of education at a local level. Employees accepted that there would have to be substantial change to adjust to the new funding situation. Interestingly, this was true even for employees who expressed concern, frustration and anger about Government policies and funding cuts. People seemed to divorce the national from the local, not letting negative feelings about the Government cloud their view of what had to be done on a local level.

Furthermore, change is nothing new in the FE sector. As Joy Mercer of the AoC explained, *'there's nobody working in a college now who wouldn't be very aware of change. It's been really very dramatic over the last 5-6 years.'* Many employees explained that they had been through substantial changes in the past, and this seemed to make them feel more prepared for the change yet to come.

However, there were also some less positive signs about the readiness for change. Although the workforce seems well used to change, there is a risk that continuing organisational change – particularly on the scale that the sector is currently facing – will lead to 'change fatigue' and begin to undermine engagement.

There is also some evidence that employees are not satisfied with the current approach to change within the sector. In their recent survey of UCU members in FE, Kinman and Wray found that just one in seven (13.7 per cent) said they were always/often clear about how changes will work out in practice, and even fewer – just one in nine (11.2 per cent) said staff were always/often consulted about change at work. In terms of wellbeing related to change, they found employees in FE were far below the

national benchmark (2.35 out of 5 compared to 3.54), and that the 'wellbeing gap' here was the biggest out of all seven HSE stressor categories.⁵⁰

Why is engagement important during change?

In the chapter above, we explained why employee engagement is so important for colleges and identified the positive outcomes associated with it. In addition to these though, employee engagement is particularly important during times of change.

Recent IPA research found three reasons why engagement was particularly important in the public sector during times of change driven by budget cuts.⁵¹ First, by engaging with employees, organisations are better able to utilise their expertise and experience to innovate and improve ways of working. With colleges facing significantly reduced budgets and the need to do more for less, employee-led innovation will be absolutely crucial to meeting the challenge. Managers and staff at case study colleges agreed that, if they were to be successful, employees at the frontline needed to play a central role in identifying waste, suggesting improvements and making changes in ways of working. As Sally Dicketts, Chief Executive of Activate Learning and Chair of AoC's Employment Committee explained, *'it's the people at the grass-roots who know what the problems are and absolutely know the solutions, so you need to involve them.'*

Second, employee engagement is vital for **effective decision-making**. Given the scale of the financial pressure on the sector, colleges will inevitably face difficult decisions. Employee innovation and improvement will not on its own be enough to deliver the levels of savings necessary, and colleges are having to reorganise and rationalise their workforces. When poorly handled, such changes can undermine employee engagement. In such situations, engaging employees is absolutely vital in order to ensure the correct decisions are made. Colleges need to engage with their staff both individually, and collectively through the unions, during times of change to give them a voice and ensure the correct decision is made.

'You know that people nearer to the challenges, on the coalface, are going to know much better than people from a distance'

Matthew Burgess, Principal, Gloucestershire College

Finally, as well as supporting high quality decision-making, employee engagement is also important in ensuring staff have **buy-in** to the change process. If employees fail to understand the rationale for decisions, or if they feel they haven't been given a say in the process, they will be less likely to accept the outcome. Conversely, if the change process has been managed carefully, with extensive involvement and consultation of employees, the outcome will be more readily accepted, even if it is not necessarily positive for employees. As Mark Rhodes, Assistant Principal of Strode's College explained *'you can't get change within an organisation without the active participation of the staff within that organisation – they have to feel like they're part of that process. If they don't, they won't really engage with the kind of changes that need to be made.'*

Challenges to engagement during change

Having outlined how important employee engagement is during change, it is also important to recognise some of the challenges that change poses to employee engagement.

First, there is a very real risk that the process of **organisational change**, driven by budget reductions, will undermine employee engagement at colleges. Such organisational change in the current context is inevitable – every case study college had undergone significant reorganisation to adapt to the reduced budgets. AoC's survey of recruitment and retention showed that 80 per cent of colleges made redundancies in 2012/13, with 90 per cent doing so in 2011/12 and 79 per cent in 2010/11. The

50 Kinman and Wray, *Further Stress*, p. 24 – 25

51 Dromey, *Meeting the Challenge*, p. 27 – 28

52 *Survey of Recruitment and Retention in Further Education Colleges 2013*, AoC, p.18-20

experience of the process itself can corrode morale. ACAS have highlighted the risk of 'survivor syndrome', when instead of feeling relieved or grateful for keeping their job, *'employers can be left with a dispirited staff who feel distrust towards their employer and resentment towards the colleagues who have moved on.'*⁵³

Second, there is a risk that if staff believe that the changes made have a negative impact on learners, this will lead to friction and disengagement. As explained above, employees in FE have a strong degree of vocational engagement – their motivation tends to derive from the social purpose of their work and the difference they make to students. If organisational changes are seen to undermine the quality of teaching and learning, this would lead to a disconnect between staff motivations and organisational actions.

Third, as explained above, if employees are not sufficiently involved in the change process or given opportunities to shape it and feed in their views, this can undermine engagement. There is worrying evidence here from Kinman and Wray's survey of UCU members in FE which showed most felt they had insufficient opportunities to question managers about change, that staff were not consulted about change, and that they were not clear on how changes would work out in practice.⁵⁴

A great deal of evidence suggested that there was a significant problem with job stress in the sector. Kinman and Wray found that almost four in five UCU members in FE (78.4 per cent) found their job stressful, three in four (58.9 per cent) felt they had high or very high levels of stress generally, and one in two (45.3 per cent) experience levels of stress that they found unacceptable. They found that one

'If you're that busy that you don't have time to stop and think about how your voice can be heard in your organisation, you just can't engage.'

Andrew Harden, Head of Further Education, UCU

of the biggest 'well-being gaps' was in the area of work demands, with employees in FE reporting far greater demands than the national benchmark.⁵⁵ High levels of job stress seem to impact on levels of sickness absence in the sector. AoC figures show that stress is the second most cited reason for sickness absence, accounting for 14.6 per cent of all absence (although this is likely to understate the true incidence).⁵⁶ In addition to high levels of work demands, employees in FE seem to struggle to achieve a good work-life balance. The Institute for Learning found that staff in FE, *'appear to feel over-burdened with their workload and struggle to maintain the work life balance that they would like.'*⁵⁷ Kinman and Wray also highlighted this problem, finding that 45 per cent of UCU

members felt unable to set a firm boundary between work and home life and 51 per cent said they often neglected personal needs because of the demands of work.⁵⁸

There is a risk that these high levels of work demands and job stress will get worse as a result of increasing demands on a shrinking workforce. Employees at case study colleges highlighted this one lecturer explaining, *'the redundancies have had a big impact and now we're back to teaching, we're missing the roles that have gone. It's very frustrating and the workload has increased. It's demoralising – it's had a big impact.'*

'Teachers are there to give students the best start in their careers. To that extent, they're very engaged, but when there's all these cut... many staff are protesting at various levels about it, because of the impact it will have on the education of students.'

Jacqui Gerrard, Chair of Governors at Strode's College

53 Survivor syndrome: supporting employees that have avoided redundancy, ACAS, www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=4350

54 Kinman and Wray, *Further Stress*, p. 24

55 Kinman and Wray, *Further Stress*, p. 12

56 *Survey of Sickness Absence in Further Education Colleges 2012/13*, AoC, December 2013, p. 23

57 *Employee Perceptions of Further Education*, p. 82

58 Kinman and Wray, *Further Stress*, p. 32

Finally, the ongoing **pressure on pay** in FE also poses a growing challenge to employee engagement. It is clear that pay is not one of the prime motivations for staff in FE; employees were far more likely to cite altruistic motivations for working in the sector rather than pay. However, there does appear to be some concern over pay in the sector. The Learning and Skills Network found in 2008 that 56 per cent of employees in FE – rising to 61 per cent of lecturers and teachers – did not think they were adequately rewarded for their work. More recent data from QDP Services shows satisfaction with pay is declining as wage constraint continues. Just three in ten employees (29 per cent) thought that they were fairly rewarded for their work, a steep decline from previous three academic years.



Having said this, evidence from both FE and other sectors suggests there is not a strong relationship between pay and engagement. For example, engagement has increased since 2010 in both the Civil Service and the NHS despite ongoing pay restraint in those sectors.⁵⁹ Furthermore, where there is frustration over pay, this tends to be directed more towards the Government and the Department for Education than towards the college as the employer as there is a general understanding about the financial restrictions in which the college operates. However, there is a risk that ongoing and prolonged pay restraint will start to undermine engagement, particularly in the context of other pressures on the workforce.

'(Employees in FE) appear to feel over-burdened with their workload and struggle to maintain the work life balance that they would like; it's at this point pay and conditions come into the spotlight and a value/benefit analysis takes place.'

Institute for Learning, Employee Perceptions of Further Education

Successful approaches to engaging staff in change

There is a paradox around engagement and change. As we've explained above, employee engagement is particularly important during times of change. Yet change – if not properly managed – can also undermine employee engagement. Below, based on the best practice we have identified, we set out some of the approaches to change that can best protect employee engagement.

First, **senior leaders** play a vital role in engaging staff during times of change. The Principal and other senior leaders need to be clear about the challenges the college faces, and why change is necessary. This means sharing relatively detailed information on college finances with staff, and explaining it in order to give them a thorough understanding of the situation. Leaders need to be honest, open and transparent when it comes to sharing information. As Joy Mercer, Director of Education Policy at the AoC explained, *'nobody really likes change. But the important thing is to make people understand the reasons for it.'*

Evidence suggests that there is some way to go in this area – a recent poll of UCU members found that just one in four (24.2 per cent) believed that they had sufficient opportunity to question managers about change at work.⁶⁰

Secondly, **employee voice** is absolutely crucial to engaging during change. Employees need to be included at an early stage in the change process as is reasonably practical. They need to be given genuine influence; with the ability both to suggest ideas, and to shape options as they emerge. The focus should be on consultation, negotiation and involvement, rather than just one-way communication. Mark Rhodes, Assistant Principal of Strode's College explained that employees *'need to feel as if they are part of the process whereby they identify the areas where change is needed, and they feel they've participated in shaping the way things are going to be changed, therefore they become part of the process themselves.'*

Colleges also need to engage both directly with employees, and indirectly, through the trade unions. Where possible, change should be approached on a partnership basis, with unions and college management working closely together to build consensus.

'(College leaders) can either at a local, workplace level, inculcate that feeling that we're all in it together, or it just comes across as heavy-handed, authoritarian management. If they're like that, it's always difficult to engage as there's a top-down feeling, but if there's more of an inclusive relationship with the staff and they respect the leadership of the college, when these things happen then they tend to respond to it together. It changes with the leadership quite frankly'

Christine Lewis, UNISON

60 Kinman and Wray, *Further Stress*, p. 24

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Conclusion

There is mounting evidence that having an engaged workforce is absolutely fundamental to organisational success. This report has shown that there is a strong case for employee engagement in further education; with apparent links to sickness absence, staff turnover, employee advocacy and, most importantly, learner outcomes.

Yet the picture on employee engagement in further education is mixed at best, and appears to be deteriorating as a result of the challenges facing the sector. On the positive side, employees have a strong sense of vocation and pride in their sector. They are loyal, committed and motivated, and they seem to take satisfaction from their role. However employees seem to be markedly less positive about their employers – they do not feel valued, and are unwilling to recommend their college as a place to work. Employees in further education also appear to have low levels of job control and involvement, poor work-related wellbeing and high levels of stress.

However, it is difficult to accurately assess the exact extent of engagement in further education given the lack of a sector-wide staff survey. Standardised staff surveys, as used in the NHS and the Civil Service, can help give a clear picture of engagement in the sector, as well as allowing different areas to compare engagement to a reliable benchmark, and track scores through time. They can also help build an evidence base for engagement, by identifying the interventions that can build engagement and the positive outcomes associated with it. A similar survey would be valuable for colleges and the sector as a whole. If such a standardised sector-wide staff survey is not practical, colleges should look to undertake rigorous and robust staff surveys and benchmark the data against other colleges where possible.

Our research – based on six in-depth case studies as well as a literature review and expert interviews – found three clear areas that colleges need to focus on.

First, FE colleges need both to ensure there is effective and engaging leadership and management. Senior leaders should see engagement as a priority. They must effectively communicate the vision and values of the institution and be visible across the college. Line managers also play a fundamental role – they need to support their staff, limit the pressure on them and ensure high quality performance management and team working.

Second, colleges need to ensure there is effective communication and a strong employee voice. Employees should be involved in decision-making and given a variety of opportunities to have their say. Effective partnership relationships with the trade unions can both support employee voice and engagement. Colleges need to empower employees, encouraging them to suggest and implement improvements in ways of working.

Third, colleges need to promote a strong set of values and a coherent strategic narrative. Values are most effective when they've been developed with employee input. They should be consistently communicated and mainstreamed throughout the college. Values should form part of the college's overall strategic narrative, which must set out the aims and objectives of the organisation and where it is heading in the future.

Employee engagement is particularly important during times of change. Engaging with employees

during change is vital in order to support innovation, to ensure effective decision-making, and to encourage staff buy-in to and ownership of change. However, organisational change also poses a significant challenge to employee engagement. We found two common themes in colleges which had successfully engaged staff during change. Firstly, senior leaders played an important role in setting out the challenges facing the college openly and honestly, explaining why change is necessary, and setting a direction of change. Secondly, employees need to be given a voice during change. This means giving them a genuine opportunity to influence change, and involving them early – both individually and collectively through the trade unions.

Colleges – and their workforces – have faced a challenging time. With further substantial budget cuts, things look set to get more difficult still. But by engaging more effectively with their dedicated and motivated employees, colleges will be better able both to face these challenges, and to improve the service they offer to learners.



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