FURTHER EDUCATION AND SKILLS: CHANGING SYSTEMS OF CHANGE

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Foreword

In 2022/2023, the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) set out to investigate the challenges facing the Further Education (FE) and Skills sector and, importantly, how it might respond at a system level. Working with the Saïd Business School, University of Oxford (Oxford Saïd) we began to explore what it would require for the sector to continue to be seen as relevant, resilient and responsive to the complex challenges and emerging opportunities that lay ahead.

At ETF we believe that the future UK economy requires the FE and Skills sector to be dynamic and sustainable, a system capable of continuously improving its practices and infrastructure to better meet the needs of learners, the job market and wider society. Such a system must enable and connect FE and Skills providers, practitioners and wider stakeholders such as employers, bringing together their expertise, talent and experience to produce a future-facing curriculum that equips learners with the technical and transversal skills needed to meet local and national skills needs, now and in the future.

These are ambitious goals for a sector that is also having to cope with the immense scale and pace of change, funding pressures, a teacher recruitment and retention crisis, the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, not to mention rapid technological innovation, shifting economic landscapes and demographic change. Given the enormity of this backdrop and the fact they transcend local priorities and skills needs, we contend that such challenges are best resolved collectively. Resolution demands collaboration from all key stakeholders, both within and outside of the English FE and Skills sector, who share the goal of supporting, energising and improving the FE and Skills system in England.

This report shares the outcomes of our initial investigation; a collaboration between ETF, Oxford Saïd, and sector leaders and policy makers with an interest in FE and Skills system renewal. Whilst this work flags key challenges faced largely by the FE college and sixth form subsectors, its vision represents a steadfast commitment to promoting excellence, improvement, innovation and resilience across the whole sector.

We believe systems thinking is the key to achieving these goals. A systems approach identifies the key stakeholders and issues that make a difference to a system's behaviour, and by mapping these, opportunities for changing the system can be devised. Drawing upon the collective wisdom of educators, administrators, researchers and thought leaders, this publication is a testament to the power of collaboration and the possibilities that can emerge when people come together to re-imagine a better future.

Importantly, this publication is the first phase of a long journey ahead. Drawing on the views of college leaders as a starting point, we recognise this is a partial representation of the complex issues affecting the sector, but ask that it is seen as an invitation to other sector stakeholders — independent training providers, adult and community learning providers, employers, third sector providers, staff faculties, learners and industry partners — to engage with this work, provide feedback and join ETF in future conversations about how we can support and engineer meaningful system change.

ETF extends its heartfelt thanks and appreciation to all the contributors who have poured their expertise, passion and vision into this publication. Contributors to this work included government officials, sector bodies, chartered institutes, higher education institutions, research bodies, learner voice representatives, and leaders from the FE and Skills sector- including colleges, sixth form colleges and independent training providers. Their invaluable insights will undoubtedly inspire others to join the movement for change and contribute to shaping the future of the FE and Skills sector. Moreover, we have a debt of gratitude to David Russell, former Chief Executive Officer of ETF, for convening and steering this work so admirably and for generating the evidence base that underpins this report.

Finally, I want to thank Professor Harvey Maylor, Dr Vikki Smith and Dr Paul Tully who pulled together the wealth of information found herein. We have here what is the start of a critical body of work that signals a theory of change for the FE and Skills sector. I look forward to engaging with you all so we can come together to advance further education and skills and secure the meaningful impact we know the sector is capable of. Together we can transform!

Dr Katerina Kolyva,
Chief Executive
Education and Training Foundation

Executive Summary

Sector reform and the challenges of tomorrow

The current scale and pace of change in UK is immense. Changes in technology, political priorities and demographics, combined with a challenging economic climate, provide a dynamic context in which all organisations have to operate. Simultaneously, this is both a risk and an opportunity. The risk for the UK is that in failing to either lead or adapt to these changes, we fall behind international competitors. The opportunity is that the majority of developed economies are facing the same threats and adapt better and faster to current and emerging needs.

These have brought to the fore the role of education and skills development and its contribution to our national ability to respond positively to such changes. The role of the FE and Skills sector is critical to both leading and responding to the changes and, by extension, the economic, commercial and social future of the UK.

It is with this in mind that in 2022/23, ETF and Oxford Saïd set out to explore the challenges and opportunities facing the FE and Skills sector. The challenges are both perennial and new, strategic and operational. The opportunity is for the system in which FE and Skills operates to become sustainably self-improving. We worked with sector leaders and policy makers with an interest in system renewal, and in particular, how ongoing renewal could be made sustainable for all those who work in the sector; simply asking people to 'do more', was not an option. Its purpose is to encourage conversations about what needs to change, including the existing approaches to change, to achieve excellence, improvement, innovation and resilience across the whole sector. This report encapsulates the core findings and emphasises the need for sustainable renewal in the sector, moving beyond the conventional call for increased efforts.

ETF and our context

At ETF, we have long recognised that a thriving UK economy necessitates a FE and Skills sector that is dynamic and sustainable. Our work across the sector has demonstrated that whilst the first is undoubtedly present, the second is the greatest area of concern to those who work in and around the sector. A sustainable system would be capable of continuously improving its practices and infrastructure to meet the needs of learners, job markets and wider society, and these changes would become widespread and self-sustaining, rather than piecemeal and at considerable personal and/or organisational expense.

The FE and Skills sector is a complex ecosystem where changes in one area can and do create unintended consequences elsewhere. In addition, it is clear that many operational challenges, particularly around recruitment of staff, require action both locally/operationally and nationally/strategically; each on their own necessary but not sufficient.

To achieve this purpose, we connected providers, practitioners, and stakeholders and fostered an environment where diverse expertise, talent, and experiences came together to shape 'the art of the possible'. Mapping the ecosystem provided a deeper understanding of the interconnected elements that contribute to both building and eroding dynamism and sustainability.

Creating a positive feedback loop

So, what would need to happen to enable FE and Skills to become a sustainably self-improving system? The opportunity is summarised in Figure 1 as a positive feedback loop:
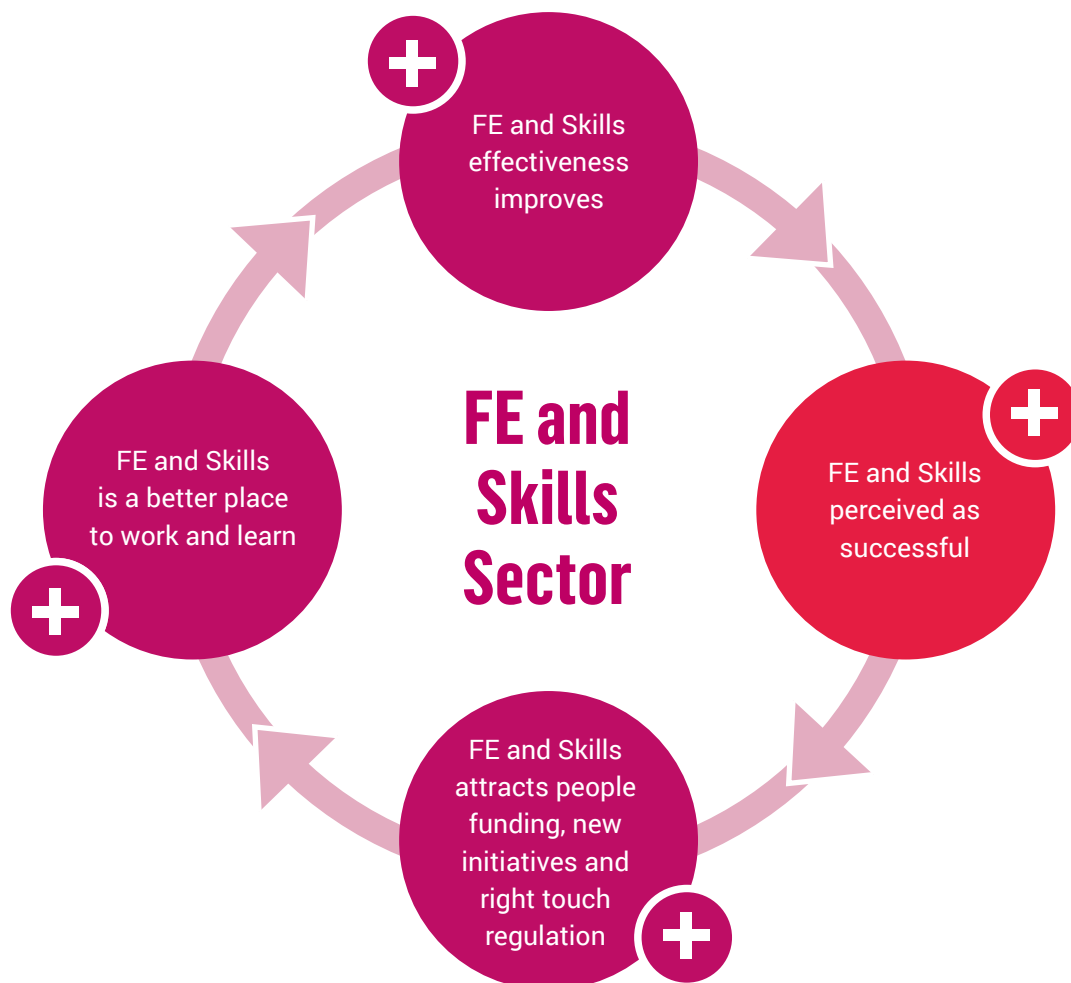

Figure 1: The art of the possible: FE and Skills as a sustainably self-improving system

A thematic analysis of data from interviews conducted in this study showed that much was already in place. However, there were two important elements that either need amending or are missing entirely. These are both necessary to make this positive loop self-sustaining.

The first is that this becomes part of the **purpose** of the sector. There was considerable divergence in the views of those interviewed, on what indeed is its purpose. Our findings suggest that if sustainable improvement is to succeed, then this needs to be central to the narrative and the mission of those involved with it. In systems terms, this is the 'North Star' for any changes.

The second area was conspicuous by its absence from any of the discussions. Nobody mentioned any consideration of activities to **promote positive perceptions of the sector**. Indeed, our analysis shows this (in red) to be a key part of this positive loop as without it, the means to attract people and funding and to build the narrative of the sector being a 'trusted partner' to government, business and communities, is absent.

Our investigations showed both a need and an appetite for rethinking at multiple levels in the ecosystem to ensure that FE and Skills continues to be relevant, resilient and responsive to the complex challenges and emerging opportunities that lie ahead. This rethinking will generate value at different levels: individual, organisational and societal. That said, the positive narrative and sense of purpose needs to underpin this work.

By understanding the interconnected elements within the sector that contribute to its overall effectiveness we can identify specific areas where positive change is needed. To do so, we need to realise a future where the FE and Skills sector resembles the above self-sustaining system:

- **FE and Skills effectiveness improves:** the sector is delivering and continuously improving high-quality training and education, fostering critical thinking, and producing learners who are well-prepared for the demands of the workplace. Innovation in teaching and learning is built-in. Learners are equipped with knowledge and critical thinking skills, making them adaptable problem solvers. This removes barriers to improving productivity and enables life-long learning.

- **FE and Skills is perceived as successful:** success is evidenced by a highly positive reputation locally and nationally, including but not limited to high employment rates among graduating learners. This encourages more learners to see FE and Skills as a viable development route and leads to an increased pool of skilled individuals in the workforce. Unemployment rates are reduced and there is improved collaboration between institutions, industries and government. FE and Skills seen as a transformative force for good.

- **FE and Skills attracts people, funding new initiatives and right-touch regulation:** the success makes the sector attractive to a diverse range of learners, faculty, and staff. This enhances the learning environment, fostering creativity, critical thinking and innovation. Funders are willing to support institutions and regulation is appropriate without being intrusive. Institutions have improved financial stability, allowing for longer-term strategic planning.

- **FE and Skills is a desirable place to work and study:** it is the first choice for those looking to develop their own and others' skills. Vocational and technical programmes are aligned with industry needs, enhancing the employability of graduates which in turn would promote improved employment destination outcomes. The visibility of learner success motivates learners to better academic performance.

Of the four elements of this system, the one where we found there to be least collective effort is that 'FES is perceived as successful.' This is a key element and one that will provide a focus for our discussions following the publication of this report.

Recognising the complexity of the ecosystem and advocating for a collaborative, inclusive, and innovative approach to drive positive change across the entire sector requires not piecemeal but systemic change. Done in this manner, it not only addresses the immediate challenges but also sets a foundation for continuous improvement and resilience in the face of evolving educational landscapes. This is ambitious by any standard, but for a sector that is also coping with funding pressures, a teacher recruitment and retention crisis and the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is also essential. To respond to these myriad and interconnected challenges, we contend that the sector needs to respond both individually AND as a collective. This emphasises collaboration among sector leaders, policy makers, and other stakeholders so we can demonstrate a commitment to systemic change rather than isolated solutions. Furthermore, by identifying the key stakeholders and issues that make a difference to sectoral behaviour we begin to embody systemic change: not just changing but changing the way that change happens.

What this work has served to reinforce is that to become a sector that is inclusive, embodies excellence in pedagogy and the leadership thereof, that is acknowledged as a profession/ professional, and able to bring about positive system change, requires a sharpened focus on what constitutes high quality teaching and learning. There are a number of factors that need to be considered in this. The focal points for engendering positive systems-level change include such elements as trust, inspection and observations, links to the labour market, collaboration, inclusivity, bridging the teaching / research gap, and pay and conditions. By addressing these matters the FE and Skills system will be better able to respond to technological innovation, economic shifts, demographic changes and expectations therein, alongside the recurrent ask for excellence, improvement, innovation, and resilience.

The FE and Skills sector is a change maker for many – for individuals, for employers, and for local and national prosperity. To be that maker of change for the FE and Skills system itself, however, requires a holistic sector strategy that is self-reinforcing and is collectively endorsed and adopted. It is thinking systemically that will allow us to map opportunities for positive change that are capable of driving professionalism, improving teaching and learning, championing inclusion, and ultimately enabling sector change – the four strategic goals of ETF.

Target model and recommendations

The core findings of this collaborative work emphasise the need for sustainable renewal in the sector, moving beyond the conventional call for increased efforts. This report presents a target model envisioning a high-quality learner experience at the core of FE and Skill's mission. To achieve this, the focus is on solving teacher recruitment and retention issues, offering clear professional pathways, providing robust support for new teachers, ensuring high-quality CPD, improving initial teacher education, and promoting effective leadership.

Introduction

The FE and Skills sector is consistently identified as a key enabler of economic prosperity and social justice, helping to close regional productivity gaps, build aspiration and stimulate civic endeavour. It is contended, then, that the better the sector does its work, the greater its local and national impact. At the same time, the sector is also facing some well-established challenges – funding shortages, policy churn, a significant teacher recruitment and retention crisis, changes to population demographics and social mobility, and more recently, geopolitical issues such as war, energy security and climate change, and the disruption to learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. These challenges place substantial pressure on the FE and Skills workforce, where issues of professional status, pay, wellbeing and job casualisation are capturing workforce agendas.

Against this backdrop, ETF, as the sector's workforce development body, commissioned an initial exploratory conversation with key leaders and influencers in the FE and Skills sector to obtain their views on how the sector could be improved and strengthened. The primary aim was to assess whether the concept of a self-improving FE and Skills system was conceivable for a sector as diverse as FE and Skills in England. Alongside this main aim, the investigation was keen to explore existing barriers that FE and Skills providers encounter when designing and implementing improvement initiatives, as well as identify the levers leaders used to support performance improvement.

This report is the first step in a collaborative journey of examining the potential for system change in the FE and Skills system. Its purpose is to stimulate an exchange with key stakeholders around the existing features of the FE and Skills ecosystem that are most likely to support improvement and effectiveness across the whole sector.

We welcome comments on this initial report and look forward to engaging further with the sector on this topic. The intention is to encourage further dialogue around the sector's aims, ambitions and constraints, and in doing so, reveal new thinking on how sector leaders can better optimise workforce performance and wellbeing.

Methodology

During 2022, ETF worked with Oxford Saïd to explore the role of systems thinking in the FE and Skills sector, with an initial focus on colleges. The genesis for this was Professor David Hargreaves's work on the 'self-improving' concept for schools (Hargreaves, 2010). ETF invited sector leaders and stakeholders to consider whether the concept could also be applied to FE and Skills. The intent of the work was to conceptualise how the FE and Skills system could be different and better and to reflect on whether stakeholder attitudes may help or hinder change in the FE college sector.

Recognising the intricate nature of the FE and Skills sector, where adjustments in one area often lead to unforeseen effects elsewhere, we brought together practitioners and stakeholders, cultivating an atmosphere where a variety of expertise influenced the realm of possibilities. Through this collaboration, we charted the landscape of the FE and Skills ecosystem, in an attempt to gain a more profound understanding into the interlinked components that either enhance or diminish its sustainability.

The investigation, carried out over ten months in 2022-23, involved 61 interviews with sector leaders, academics and government officials alongside a series of symposia with leaders and key influencers, and was facilitated and hosted by Oxford Saïd.

Systems thinking: sensemaking and sensegiving in complex, dynamic and multi-agency contexts

Background

Our approach here uses the lens of Systems Thinking to provide both a means for us individually to explore the complex system that is FE and Skills, and to enable us to have a means to explain it to others.

Our approach means that we do not treat any element in isolation (traditional linear problem-solving), but recognise that a system such as FE and Skills is multi-faceted and that the elements that comprise it are both interconnected and interdependent. The development of the rich array of tools for analysis and synthesis began in earnest as a recognisable area in the 1950s. Today we view Systems Thinking as *"…a set of synergistic analytical skills used to improve the capability of identifying and understanding systems, predicting their behaviours, and devising modifications to them in order to produce desired effects. These skills [themselves] work together as a system."*

Two further ideas are central to our consideration. The first concerns the **boundaries** of any system. This is not the same as identifying far-removed effects of the system, but about making a pragmatic determination of what is going to be of interest to us in our analysis. The next, linked to this, concerns **levels or 'hierarchies'** that exist within systems. For instance, a marking and assessment system is one operational element within the larger system of a college, which is itself an element of a larger social, commercial and educational system. Our level of analysis is a crucial consideration; too low and it risks missing important and highly influential elements at higher levels, or being swamped by elements. If chosen too high, then the abstraction loses its meaning.

Within a level of analysis, our **unit of analysis** is both existing and future systems. These systems comprise actors (individuals, groups or organisations) and actions. How these actors and actions are organised will determine the level of performance of that system. Systems can, and often are purposefully designed, and with this design comes tensions and alignments between different parts of the system. For instance, the choice of an outsourced delivery partner in the design of a service system, may simplify an organisation's HR processes by reducing direct head count, but does introduce a potential tension between the objectives of the organisation and its new supplier.

Systemic loops

Drawing on the traditions of soft systems thinking, we started by searching for feedback loops, that is sets of actors and actions that were part of systems that would themselves be self-sustaining, at least in the short term. These were termed 'positive' where they yielded benefit for the organisation at the focus of the analysis, or 'negative' where they were detrimental. These loops are interesting, because they are the basic building blocks of one of our most powerful tool – the systems map.

Classic positive loops include the **trust loop:**
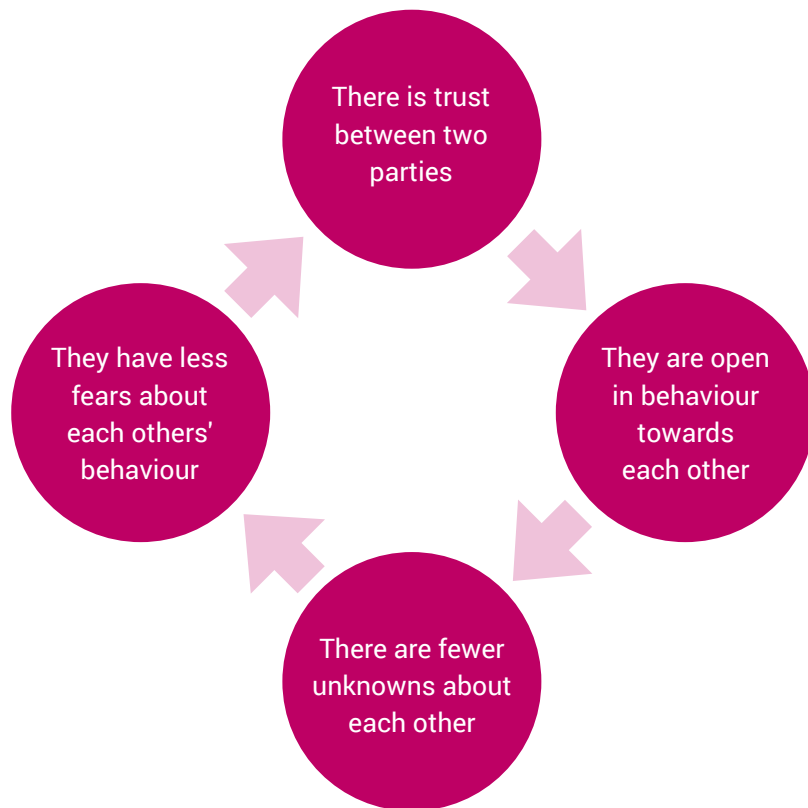
Figure 2: The trust loop

Here, provided that none of the elements of the loop are broken, for instance by a change in the behaviour of one of the parties, then trust between two parties will increase. This is not going to be infinite, but in the short-term presents a useful approximation of that part of a system.

Classic negative loops include the **scrutiny loop:**
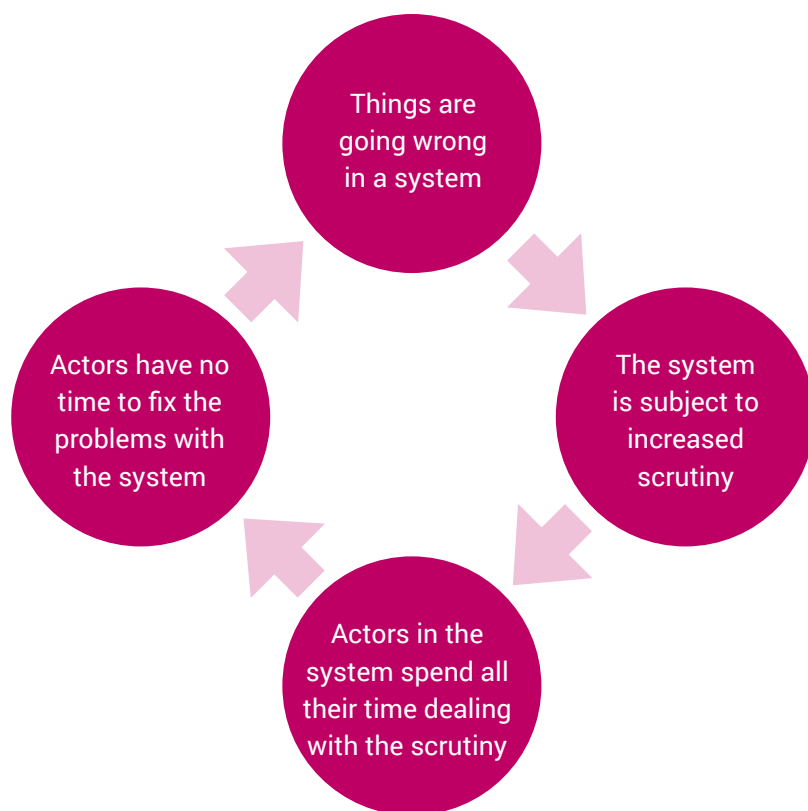
Figure 3: The scrutiny loop

This is a self-defeating loop, instigated in many organisations. Unless something is changed in this loop, there is little chance the system can be improved.

Recognising and mapping these loops is useful in itself but the real power is when the agents in the system combine to:

1. Create a positive loop that does not currently exist
2. Break a negative loop that does.

The main example of the first is figure 1 in this report. The second is another opportunity for some further synthesis as it was clear that hiring and recruitment, for instance, were in a profoundly negative loop with workload and therefore staff stress.

The analysis of the current and potential future systems are the subject of the next section.

Mapping the FE and Skills system

In an attempt to better understand the FE and Skills sector, the study set about trying to map the sector and in so doing identify any trust or scrutiny loops.

In mapping the sector as it operates now, the complexity of the sector is revealed. What is apparent is that there is no obvious starting point. Any one element is immediately swamped from the feeds of other elements and actors in the system. This lack of a starting point makes articulating a particular problem or solution highly problematic given that multiple interdependencies impact on every aspect of the system. The visual chaos of the diagram is, then, an apt metaphor for the confusion, fragmentation and intensification experienced by those working in the sector. To be able to identify those factors contributing the greatest difference to learners and stakeholders demands a simplified view. Only then can the sector take collective ownership for improvement.

Figure 4: The FE and Skills map as of 2023

Envisioning the future system

In depicting the FE and Skills system as viewed today, the symposia attendees felt that too few **trust loops** were operating across the sector, and consequently, the FE and Skills system was not optimising its workforce or its resources. This lack of optimisation translated into inefficiencies, conflicting goals, staffing difficulties and ultimately, less successful outcomes for learners. The challenge then embarked upon was to define an ideal scenario. The following diagram provides an aspirational map of the FE and Skills sector. Questions remain as to its applicability and relevance to the wider FE and Skills system, but we hope is a useful starting point for discussion.

Figure 5: Future FE and Skills view

The shading shows which factors are **drivers only**, rather than **drivers and effects**. It delineates the various starting points for inputting change into the system. The model identifies a 'high quality learner experience' that meets industry needs as being central to the mission of FE and Skills, and that delivering 'high quality teaching' is instrumental to this, and this appears to be dependent on:

• Improving the public's understanding of FE and Skills and what it achieves, increasing public and political trust in the system

• Stronger sector advocacy, using employers and learners to promote its achievements and success stories

• Solving the teacher recruitment and retention issues causing staff churn

• Offering clear professional pathways to make FE and Skills a more attractive career

• Providing much better support for new FE and Skills teachers

• Developing high-quality, relevant and accessible Continuing Professional Development (CPD) built on national professional standards

• Improving the quality of initial teacher education (ITE)

• Ensuring teachers are prepared for teaching in an age of rapid industrial and social change

• Finding innovative ways to engage employers

• High-quality leadership.

Key findings – systemic themes: towards sustainable improvement

Having mapped the current and future view, we analysed the themes emerging from the initial interviews. Those themes deemed critical to enabling sector improvement are captured in the table below. The 'North Star' – here being an agreed purpose of and for FE & Skills – is essential.

Element	Theme	Summary	Caveat
North Star	Purpose	Diverse perspectives surfaced regarding the core purpose of the FE and Skills system. Predominantly, participants from the FE college sector articulated its purpose in socio-economic terms, such as serving the community, addressing regional skill shortages, combating poverty, and facilitating transformative life experiences leading to employment. However, funding agencies and ministers predominantly gauged its effectiveness based on learner participation rates, qualifications attained, and inspection outcomes.	The purpose of FE and Skills remains a subject of debate. During the concluding reflection session of this investigation, a lingering question persisted: can or should these divergent views be integrated to form a cohesive whole.

Element	Theme	Summary	Caveat
FE and Skills attracts people, funding, new initiatives and right-touch regulation	Trust	Trust emerged as a prevalent theme, underscoring a widespread desire for greater transparency and mutual respect among the various stakeholders within the system.	Perceptions of trustworthiness often hinge on an individual's role within the system.
	Inspection	Inspection emerged as a shared concern, reflecting a consensus on the regulatory burden placed upon the sector. The interaction between system and professional regulators adds further complexity to an already over-regulated and reformed system. Participants expressed apprehension that inspections, rather than being supportive, tend to impose restrictive measures.	There was a demand for holistic system metrics that accurately reflect the sector's true purpose. Participants advocate for coordinated regulatory regimes, such as Ofsted, OfS, CQC (for SEND), NMC/HCPC (for healthcare), QAA, and OfQual, possibly overseen by the FEC.
	Links to the labour market	The current FE and Skills system is one where employers are only weakly connected, with limited government incentives to induce behavioural change and investment among employers.	There is a mismatch between rhetoric and reality: while there is a recognised need for increased employer engagement, the absence of incentives stifles such involvement. Strengthening employer links is crucial for a robust FE and Skills system, necessitating close feedback loops between employers and providers to address labour market needs and staff skill gaps effectively.

Element	Theme	Summary	Caveat
FE and Skills is a better place to work and learn	Collaborative endeavour	A collective approach to problem-solving was presented as a defining characteristic of an effective FE and Skills system. Connectivity and collaboration was considered good for building trust and mutual understanding. Emphasis was placed on the need to invest in and cultivate communities of practice as a way to secure sustained growth.	The existence of inter-provider competition poses a significant challenge to collaboration. And yet, a unified, collective approach to thinking about and solving the sector's problems is required. However, there is no consensus on a single model of collaboration.
	Pay and conditions	Remuneration that reflects the professional responsibilities undertaken by the FE and Skills workforce is needed.	Current pay structures fail to recognise the dual professionalism and expertise exhibited by practitioners, lagging behind compensation standards in schools and universities. This is essential if the FE and Skills workforce is be engaged, motivated and retained.
	Observation culture	A culture of frequent observation was seen as a powerful mechanism for systemic improvement in which teachers are encouraged to be in and out of each other's classroom all the time.	Effective observations need to be low-stakes, non-hierarchical, developmental, and centred on professional dialogue. They need to stand separate from any inspection regime.

Element	Theme	Summary	Caveat
FE and Skills effectiveness improves	Closing the teaching / research gap	Enhancing the effectiveness of FE and Skills hinges on bridging the gap between teaching and research. Advocates underscored the significance of regular dialogue between research and teaching realms, recognising it as pivotal for mutual enhancement and impact amplification. This approach not only enriches the learning experience but also challenges the misconception that FE and Skills solely involves applying existing knowledge rather than fostering its generation.	Closing the teaching-research gap resonated strongly among educators closely engaged with learners. It appeared less prominently in the narratives of senior leaders. This disparity partly stems from the ongoing debate surrounding the allocation of non-contact time for research activities, which remains a contentious issue within the sector.

In addition to the themes captured in the preceding table, there are two remaining elements that are also important features of context. Firstly, there was a strong recognition of the role that leaders play in creating learning organisations, and the role of providers in establishing a self-improving FE and Skills sector. This was identified by participants (particularly those working directly in the FE and Skills system) as being important to facilitating sector improvement. However, the recognition went beyond their local impact to recognise that collectively, they operate at multiple levels in any sustainable system of improvement, and requires a collective focus on drivers such as: Professional Standards; accessible CPD; employer incentives to engage; high quality ITE; good leadership; advocacy for and trust in the system – echoing other themes shown above. Macro issues such as recruitment need macro solutions. Likewise, the need for a sector-wide workforce strategy was considered to be a joint enterprise between ETF and key FE and Skills stakeholders with the aim of promoting **recognisable professionalism.**

Lastly, and by no means less importantly, was a strong will to ensure that no part of the sector is left out, and this especially applies to SEND learners who need significantly more support than they currently receive. A proposal made by many participants was to map Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging (EDIB) throughout the FE and Skills system, which a systems change approach would facilitate. There was consensus among many participants that due recognition of the high proportion of SEND learners already in the FE and Skills system is required; this makes FE and Skills distinct from schools and higher education, in terms of reach and value, but places challenges on staff with limited confidence / expertise in managing SEND issues effectively.

The art of the possible

In the aspirational map of the sector, we see that complexity remains in the FE and Skills system where changes in one area have a ripple effect and impact elsewhere. To improve our understanding of why the complexity remained, the themes enumerated above were analysed against the backdrop of the future view. This was done with a goal of further simplicity and defining a single positive feedback loop, that is self-sustaining and capable of bringing about positive change. What became evident was that there were two important elements that either needed amending or introducing - both necessary to make this positive loop self-sustaining.

The first element concerns the **purpose** of the sector. There was considerable divergence in the views of those interviewed, on what indeed is its purpose. Our findings suggest that if sustainable improvement is to succeed, then this needs to be central to the narrative and the mission of those involved with it. In systems terms, this is the 'North Star' for any changes.

The second element was conspicuous by its absence from any of the discussions. Nobody mentioned any consideration of activities to **promote positive perceptions of the sector**. Indeed, our analysis shows this (in red) to be a key part of this positive loop as without it, the means to attract people and funding and to build the narrative of the sector being a 'trusted partner' to government, business and communities, is absent.

The single positive feedback loop then comes together as follows:
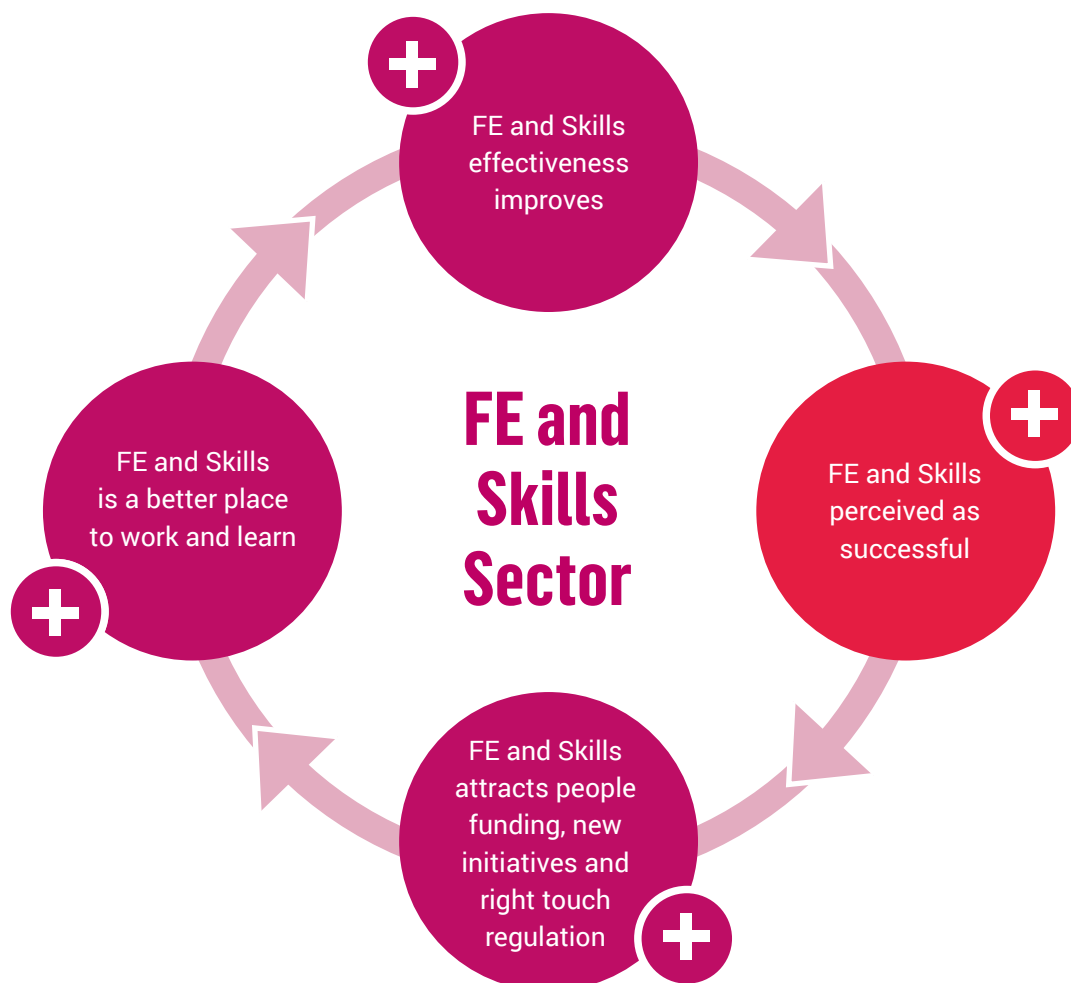

Figure 1: The art of the possible: FE and Skills as a sustainably self-improving system

Changing systems of change

To bring to life the single positive feedback loop; to be the system that is able to deliver on its purpose, two ingrained 'in-group' belief systems that hold the sector back, as identified by participants, need resolving. Oversimplified for effect, these belief systems are typified as follows:

1. Policy makers believe that FE and Skills is important but not effective and is unable to produce good returns on public investment compared to schools and universities, which is largely a result of the limited capability of the people in it.

2. FE and Skills practitioners think the sector is amazing, misunderstood, underfunded, undervalued and a victim of policy turmoil.

Participants recognised these as stereotypes founded on persistent, longstanding misconceptions that can block genuine collaboration. It was agreed that collaboration was a powerful mechanism for dispelling these myths; as would positive self-talk where stakeholders consciously and intentionally use optimistic and supportive language when talking about the sector as a means to cultivate sector self-confidence, resilience, and a positive mindset.

The entry point to the single positive feedback loop is how the FE and Skills sector is perceived and how its purpose is communicated and understood. This requires a collective commitment to changing the dialogue in use. It involves replacing negative or self-defeating narratives with positive statements. It requires that the sector releases the prevailing negative framing and focuses on positive outcomes, claiming the successes of today but also of tomorrow by visualising its future impact, and articulating the vision via a sector and provider level theory of change. A positive narrative that acknowledges and celebrates the transformative work undertaken by the FE and Skills sector, that emphasises the sector's crucial role in driving positive change and societal advancement, will build confidence within sector but also in the sector itself. By shifting the narrative towards one that recognises and celebrates positive contributions, brings opportunity to advocate for greater support, investment, and recognition from policymakers, stakeholders, and society at large; it will also generate a shared clarity of purpose.

Changing the narrative surrounding the FE and Skills sector can catalyse a cultural transformation that enhances morale, fosters collaboration and innovation, attracts talent, and ultimately leads to greater societal impact and recognition. Positive storytelling can have dramatic effect:

- highlighting success stories and impactful initiatives instils a sense of pride and optimism within the sector; changing pessimism or resignation to possibility and aspiration
- recognising the valuable work of FE and Skills boosts morale among educators, learners, and stakeholders
- feeling appreciated and valued for their contribution increases motivation, leads to higher levels of engagement and job satisfaction
- highlighting the sector's impact and opportunities for professional growth and development helps attract and retain top talent, strengthening the workforce and enhancing capacity
- collaborating fosters partnership working with industry partners and other stakeholders and leads to the co-creation of solutions to complex challenges, driving greater impact and effectiveness across the sector
- equipping individuals with the skills, knowledge, and opportunities they need to succeed, FE and Skills contributes to social mobility, economic prosperity, and overall societal well-being.

This culminates in a shared understanding of the purpose of the FE and Skills sector – shared by those within the system but also those external to it, for example, prospective learners, parents, funders, inspectorates and policy makers.

A model for driving positive change
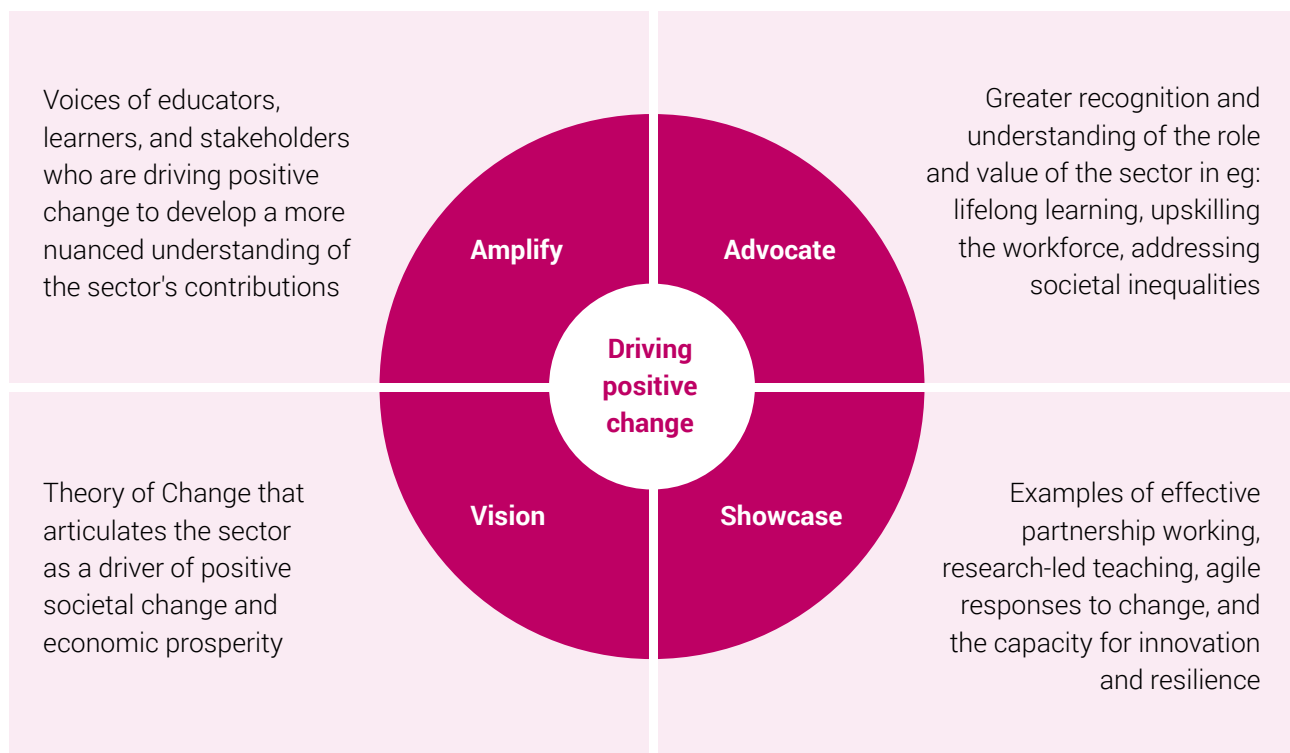
Figure 6: A model for driving positive change

Implications for FE and Skills

The core findings of this collaborative work emphasise the need for sustainable renewal in the sector, moving beyond the conventional call for increased efforts.

This report presents a target model envisioning a high-quality learner experience at the core of FE and Skill's mission. To achieve this, the focus is on solving teacher recruitment and retention issues, offering clear professional pathways, providing robust support for new teachers, ensuring high-quality CPD, improving initial teacher education, and promoting effective leadership. The diagram below identifies the workforce development agenda necessary to engender positive systems-level change:

Figure 7: The workforce development agenda

Focal points to bring about positive system change within FE and Skills

Each of the areas above need to be capable of responding to the changing landscape in which further education and skills operates. This requires a holistic sector strategy that is self-reinforcing and is collectively endorsed and adopted. It underscores the need for collaboration and lays the foundation for continuous improvement. It is thinking systemically that allows us to map opportunities for positive change that are capable of amplifying professionalism, improving teaching and learning, championing inclusion, and ultimately enabling sector change – the four strategic goals of the ETF.

The six strategic strands for improvement aim to enhance teaching, learning, and the overall effectiveness of the FE and Skills sector. Each of these start-points can be visualised as a network of relations with other key factors, with a clear line-of-sight to the goal of improving the quality of teaching (and with this, an enhanced reputation for the FE and Skills sector). As recommendations they set out six distinctive strands of work which are expected to have a positive effect on the overall FE and Skills system.

Strand 1: Good Leadership

Good leadership is the lifeblood of a cohesive, dynamic and forward-looking FE and Skills sector, which is why it forms such a pivotal part of these recommendations. When leaders prioritise their own development, they demonstrate the importance of continuous learning and self-improvement to their staff. This cultivates a learning culture where employees are encouraged to pursue CPD opportunities, develop new skills, and stay updated on industry developments. A learning-oriented culture is essential for fostering innovation, resilience, and adaptability within the organisations delivering teaching and learning, ultimately driving organisational success. Good leadership, then, is instrumental for building positive, trust-based learning cultures where workers flourish and organisations are committed to improvement.

Starting Point	Key Steps to Reform			Strategic Goal	Core Objective
Good Leadership	Develop an evidence-informed leadership strategy that embraces EDIB, ESD and wellbeing	Develop/ co-design models of trust, collaboration and observation with sector	Develop accreditation for 'healthy work', ESD and EDIB that organisations can use to attract staff	Building trusting and inclusive learning cultures and collaborative structures	Quality of Teaching and Learning

Figure 8: Good Leadership

Strand 2: Quality Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

Installing rigour and professionalism across the workforce means establishing recognised and reputable teaching qualifications, and ensuring this training is delivered by high-quality providers. It comes at a time of momentous industrial and social change, and where the need for effective teachers has never been greater. Having an accepted baseline for teaching, training and learning across the sector is a key enabler, which can be supplemented by further continuous professional development, to ensure practitioners are confident and credible in their technical/ vocational specialism and pedagogic identity.

Starting Point	Key Steps to Reform			Strategic Goal	Core Objective
Quality of ITE	Map ITE landscape and future needs	Set out DET, QTLS and ATS ITE framework and consider role of pre- approval of ITE providers	Develop ITE accreditation/ endorsement system	Prepare new teachers for industrial and social change	Quality of Teaching and Learning

Figure 9: Quality Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

Strand 3: Access to CPD

Practitioners who are proactively engaged in their CPD and view learning as the engine for self-improvement and higher-impact are at the core of organisational learning (Senge 2006). A drive towards personal mastery thrives when CPD is encouraged, accessible, relevant and evidence-informed. The ETF, as the sector's workforce development body, offers professional development opportunities that support personal growth, build expertise, improve outcomes and address sector-wide challenges. By engaging with learning though ETF we will be positioned to use the data it provides to define a much-needed FE and Skills workforce development strategy.

Starting Point	Key Steps to Reform			Strategic Goal	Core Objective
Access to CPD	Roll-out skills scan to assess training need as aligned to Professional Standards	Develop high-powered data analytics that calculate workforce needs and capacity	Produce an inclusive FE and Skills Workforce Strategy supported by both sector and organisational theories of change	Meet unmet needs and develop workforce capacity	Quality of Teaching and Learning

Figure 10: Access to CPD

Strand 4: Research informed practice

Research-informed practice involves the systematic integration of empirical evidence, theoretical frameworks, and practical knowledge into professional decision-making and action. By grounding decisions and interventions in the latest research findings, practitioners ensure that their approaches are not only evidence-based but also responsive to the dynamic needs of their learners. This approach fosters a culture of continuous learning and improvement, allowing practitioners to adapt their strategies based on emerging research and effective models of practices, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and impact of their work.

Starting Point	Key Steps to Reform			Strategic Goal	Core Objective
Research Informed Practice	Provide access to a hub of FE and Skills research	Establish a research community of practice	Synthesise research outputs to amplify learning	Foster a research culture across FE and Skills	Quality of Teaching and Learning

Figure 11: Research informed practice

Strand 5: Professional Standards

Embedding professional standards across the sector is an established method of embedding professionalism and rigour in teaching and learning, in which pedagogy is evidence-led and centred on learner outcomes. Networked professionals in communities-of-practice are at the heart of this programme, as are high-quality contextualised resources that respond directly to needs across subsectors. As professional standards are voluntary in English FE and Skills, increased sector engagement is very much dependent on demonstrating their impact on provider and learner outcomes.

Starting Point	Key Steps to Reform			Strategic Goal	Core Objective
Professional Standards	Embed Professional Standards and evidence-based practice into CPD portfolio	Develop Communities of Practice to support Professional Standards adoption	Assess impact of Professional Standards on improvement across the sector	Develop rigorous, evidence-led standards that drive improvement	Quality of Teaching and Learning

Figure 12: Professional Standards

Strand 6: Career Pathways and Support

Career development is at the heart of workforce professionalism and provides incentives for new and existing staff to remain in the system, supporting their career aspirations, growing their expertise and facilitating their self-improvement. This will be enhanced by developing the concept of a (voluntary) professional register which reinforces the value of being professionally qualified and gives individuals access to a personalised, structured programme of professional development to support their career growth.
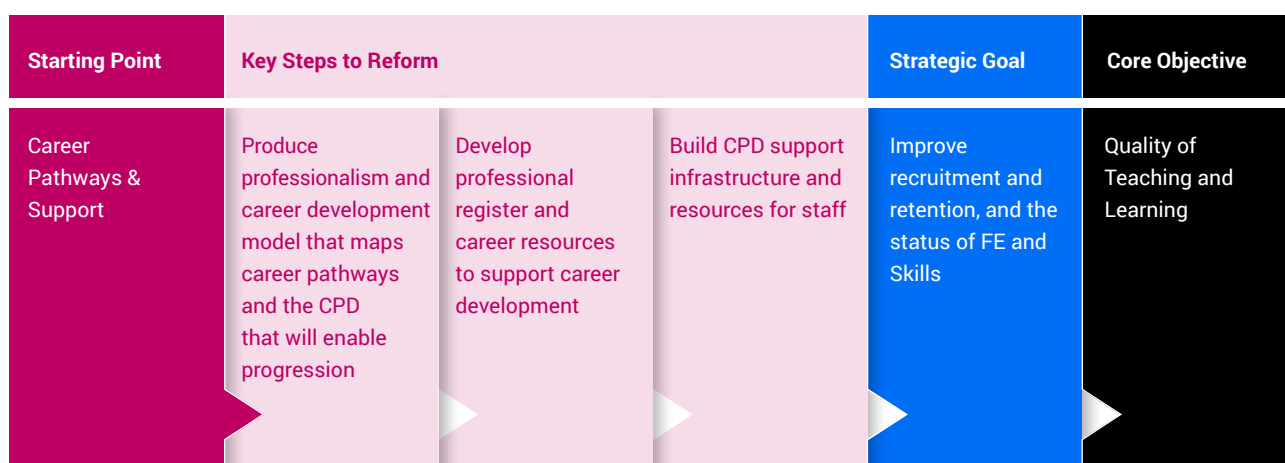
Starting Point	Key Steps to Reform			Strategic Goal	Core Objective
Career Pathways & Support	Produce professionalism and career development model that maps career pathways and the CPD that will enable progression	Develop professional register and career resources to support career development	Build CPD support infrastructure and resources for staff	Improve recruitment and retention, and the status of FE and Skills	Quality of Teaching and Learning

**Figure 13: Career Pathways and Support**

Conclusions

The FE and Skills sector delivers improved learner outcomes and impact for individual learners as well as wider societal and economic benefits. In August 2023, Ofsted data (2023) showed that 91% of general FE colleges hold a 'good' or 'outstanding' judgment. The extent that this is known and shared by the wider public is uncertain; the place and purpose of the FE and Skills sector needs amplifying, and in so doing there is huge scope for developing awareness of what FE and Skills achieves, capturing this is organsitional and sector theories of change. Not only would this build public and political trust in the system, it would also attract talented teachers into FE and Skills providers which would, in turn, raise the quality of teaching across the sector.

Collectively, these ambitious strands of reform will move the sector from its current place to somewhere much closer to a self-improving system. Reform is approached in small steps but it has the capacity to deliver huge returns. These small steps, we believe, should be focused on introducing more **trust loops** into the system, making it more likely that reform is embraced and enacted. What is clear from this work is that reform is not possible without a systems approach to change and genuine collaboration.

The work herein explored the concept of systems thinking as a vehicle to bring about continuous improvement across the FE and Skills sector. However, participants did not believe that the sector was ready to make the required changes on its own. Past change, they reported, was often piecemeal, top-down, disruptive and unresponsive to local FE and Skills needs. It could also be stressful and time-consuming to deliver, and there was doubt as to whether top-down change had always benefited learners. All believed there needed to be a different way to support sector reform.

In realising this, participants in our study confirmed that systems thinking, including an understanding of its parts and their relations, is required if the FE and Skills system is to have the impact it desires and is capable of. This demands system change – change that impacts on the people, organisations, policies, processes, cultures, beliefs and environments that make up the FE and Skills system. In doing so, there are significant benefits for the whole sector and this deserves to be explored further. ETF's proposal is to build the collaboration and trust needed to invest in this change, by setting up a FE and Skills-wide system reform group; a group that is:

- convened by a neutral party such as ETF
- comprised of the full diversity of the sector
- comprised of senior leaders, policymakers, FE and Skills staff, learners and academia
- inclusive of key sector stakeholders and representative bodies
- convened on neutral territory with a residential element
- able to benefit from short, practical expert inputs on systems thinking and transformation
- externally funding to design and plan the work necessary to create a systemic model of change.
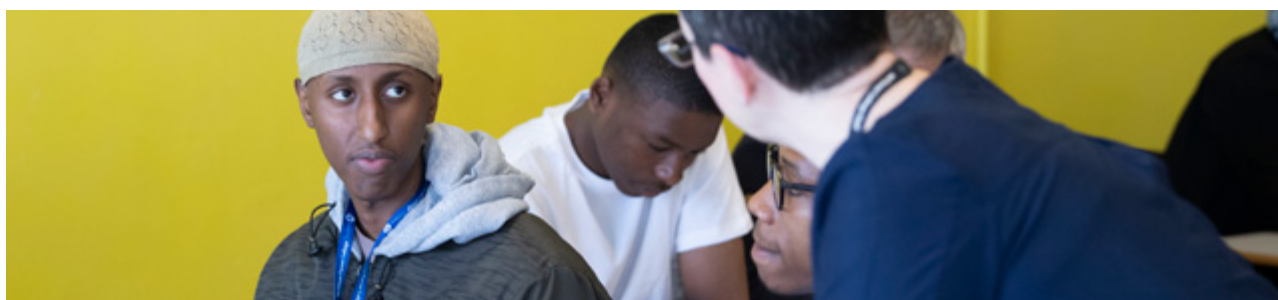
What is essential is that this work moves beyond the college perspective and out to the wider sector. It may be that the insights here are helpful to FE colleges alone, or it could be that we have discovered issues and opportunities for system reform which are relevant and pressing for other parts of the FE and Skills sector. As such, we would suggest that the three initial focal points for the reform group should be to:

1. further develop and refine the FE and Skills vision system map – inviting others from across the sector to contribute

2. start testing how possible actions might play through in practice, and in what order, to examine more closely the inter-dependences between different parts of the system and actors that operate within it

3. to develop, in collaboration, a theory of change model that considers what impact we want the sector to have, and new system-wide metrics that are better aligned with the true purposes of the FE and Skills system.

ETF looks forward to the coming discussions.

Appendix

Acronyms

CPD	Continuous Professional Development
EDIB	Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging
ETF	Education and Training Foundation
FE	Further Education
FEC	Further Education Commissioner
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

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