
It all began one morning in December 2010 when Alan Tuckett, at that time Chief Executive of NIACE, telephoned me to ask whether I'd be interested in chairing a commission being set up jointly by NIACE, the Association of Colleges (AoC) and the 157 Group to investigate the role of colleges in their communities. 'The coalition has issued all these White Papers,' he said, 'talking about the need for colleges to work closely with employers

and Skills, the Skills Funding Agency, Ofsted and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. We issued an immediate call for evidence, set up a series of six thematic seminars, commissioned a full review of the literature and arranged for me, as chair, to undertake a series of college visits to see practice at first hand. In July we issued an interim report and our final report, *A dynamic nucleus: Colleges at the heart of local communities*,

Colleges at the heart of local communities

The Commission on Colleges in their Communities found many colleges already deeply embedded in the lives of their communities. The commission's final report sets out actions to support all colleges in living up to the practice of the best, writes **MARGARET SHARP**

and learners, and then they add on the phrase about "serving their communities" but nobody seems to know precisely what this means ... We want you to find out what's going on, in Britain and elsewhere, and to provide a blueprint of what, given present funding constraints, colleges might be doing to make those words a reality.'

The inquiry was set up in January 2011. Although it had government backing – which is to say, the government was pleased it had been set up and, indeed, wanted its interim findings to inform its own consultation on further education – it was independent. Membership was drawn from college principals, governors, unions, employers, adult education, the AoC and 157 Group, and we had observers from the Department for Business, Innovation

was launched at the AoC Conference in November 2011.

A number of clear messages emerged from this bevy of activity.

First and foremost, we learned that further education colleges are, often, already embedded in their communities. Their provision is exceptionally diverse, with informal and non-accredited learning sitting alongside vocational and academic study. As well as providing learning and skills, many colleges have developed a significant wider role in their communities, contributing to widening access to learning, community cohesion and the development of civil society and enterprise.

Second, although there has been some simplification, colleges still have to negotiate an unduly complex funding regime. Confronted

by cuts and other uncertainties on top of this complexity, some colleges have opted to retreat to the relatively the low-risk areas of 16–19 provision and apprenticeships. Other colleges, however, have managed to negotiate their way through and have developed innovative programmes reaching out to marginalised, ‘hard-to-reach’ groups. These achievements have often been developed through creative partnerships of one kind or another.

Third, negotiating partnership agreements, sometimes three or four-way, takes a good deal of top management time, requires considerable resource input and carries further risks. Nevertheless, where successful, they unlock new resources, spread risk and can bring new, innovative ideas into play.

Local decision-making

Fourth, while it is difficult to translate overseas experience because of different institutional and cultural backgrounds, one lesson from abroad is the importance of local decision-making, where ‘local’ means close to the consumer and the needs of the locality. Systems which give considerable autonomy to the local unit have tended to be more successful, as have governance regimes which recognise local stakeholder involvement.

Fifth, in terms of meeting the skills needs of the local area, employer engagement is vital, but the most successful is engagement that goes beyond just treating employers as customers and involves them as co-designers of the skills training offer. Likewise, in terms of meeting learner needs, the greater the involvement of learners in the design of the curriculum, the greater the buy-in, sense of ownership and achievement, the greater the success.

Finally, we found that colleges do not just make an impact on the local economy and the labour force needs of local businesses. By investing in colleges, we get social returns too. Reaching out to disadvantaged, hard-to-reach groups within their communities not only leads to a steady supply of learners for higher-level, qualification-based study, but supports colleges’ wider role in promoting the wellbeing and cohesion of their communities. This, in turn, leads to significant benefits in other areas of public policy, including health, social care, support for families, volunteering and the Big Society.

These findings helped us to develop our vision of the role colleges might play in their communities. To explain it, we coined the phrase ‘dynamic nucleus’ to express what

colleges, at their best, can do within their communities. Partnership is a critical part of our vision. We see colleges promoting a shared agenda of activities which not only fulfill their central role of providing learning and skills training to young people and adults but also reach out into their communities, catalysing a whole range of further activities.

There is nothing new in this: as we found, the best of our further education colleges are in many respects already fulfilling this vision and the aspiration was and is that all colleges should live up to the practice of the best. We feel doing so will help colleges to develop a clearer role and more distinct brand image, as have their counterparts in other countries.

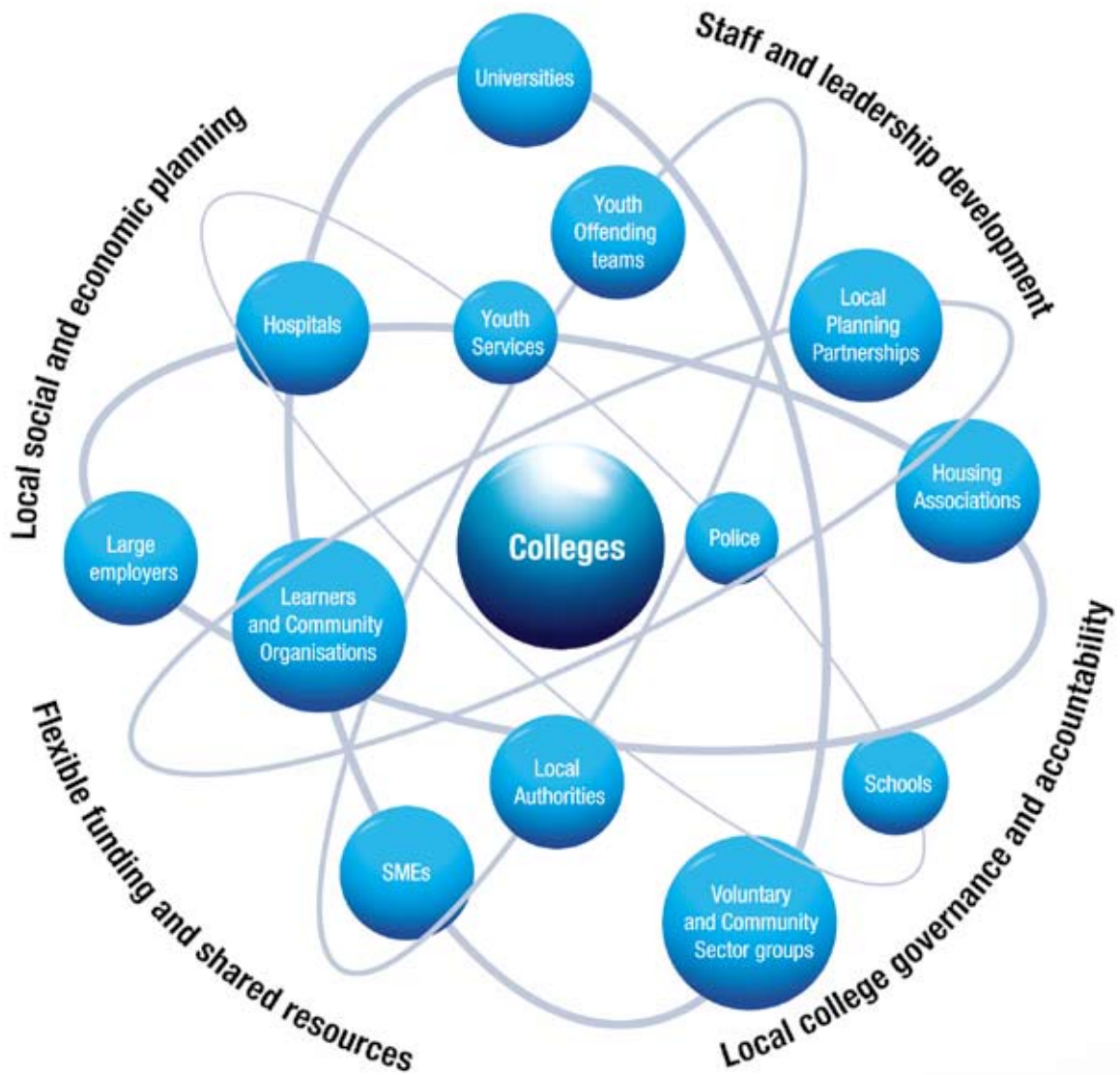
The key is the formation of partnerships which have the benefit both of spreading risks and of catalysing action. Partnerships are essentially about establishing relationships of mutual trust which encourage all players in the partnership to invest in the project, whether it is employers involved in a skills training initiative or a local authority establishing a community hub in a deprived community.

Social energy

We need to think about partnerships in new ways – not just ‘more meetings’. Partnerships unlock social energy – people are often more willing to undertake activities, particularly where there are uncertainties, jointly rather than by themselves. Through partnerships colleges can reach out to their communities and secure buy-in to projects. For example, one college runs a community hub jointly with the local authority which channels the energy of its young people into a boxing club and a cycling club, both of which now raise substantial sums for local charities from sponsored activities. Such projects not only build the self-esteem of participants but also unleash social energy – and social energy, channeled to positive ends, increases both economic and social productivity. Improved levels of education and skill means higher economic productivity, but the knock-on effects of higher self-confidence and self-esteem in the community context mean a lower incidence of crime, better health, happiness and community cohesion.

The college is seen, therefore, as the central player in a network of partnerships, dynamic in the sense of developing and engaging with other partners. This enables the network itself to become part of the dynamic, with the college at its heart, as the diagram overleaf shows.

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△ A dynamic nucleus: the commission saw the college as the central player in a network of partnerships, dynamic in the sense of developing and engaging with other partners; thus enabling the network itself to become part of the dynamic, with the college at its heart.

vision reflects what the best colleges are already achieving. The commission identified a series of actions which would encourage others to follow their example, and so help turn the vision into reality. These involve commitment in different ways from all stakeholders: from the colleges themselves, their staff, their learners and their governors; from employers, large and small; from local authorities, local charities and other local groups; from sector organisations such as the Learning and Skills Improvement Service and the AoC; and, last but not least, from central government.

A new generation of entrepreneurial college leaders – Leadership is a key feature of achieving any change. Many of the qualities of leadership are innate, but experience has shown that there are also skills to be learned. If we are to make this vision a reality we need college leaders who are prepared to take risks and innovate while retaining a

clear and passionate focus on teaching and learning. We recommend that the sector gives serious consideration to the establishment of a dedicated sector leadership centre which combines first-class training with guidance and peer support in building partnerships and taking and handling risk.

Working with local employers to upgrade skills and create jobs – High on the agenda in present circumstances is the need to alleviate unemployment, especially among young people. Colleges need to be working actively to develop partnerships with local employers to identify skills gaps and develop apprenticeships, and working actively with them to upgrade the skills of the local labour force.

Reaching out to smaller firms – Many colleges already work closely with large employers in their area, but more needs to be done to reach out to small and medium sized enterprises

(SMEs) using the new funding flexibilities. Here there are lessons to be learned from the Canadian experience where colleges work with SMEs not only to train their workforce but also to provide a range of hands-on advice and help services.

Making joined-up government work at a local level – Partnership with public-sector organisations is an essential part of translating the vision into reality. Joined-up government may prove difficult at a national level but there are many examples of it working very effectively at a local level – again it needs leadership and trust. It is often a matter of where there is a will, there is a way. Colleges need to be proactive in seeking partnerships with local authorities, health providers, the police and youth offending teams, often in collaboration with charities and local community groups. Such partnerships have been shown to yield substantial benefits, transforming the lives of individuals and the wellbeing of whole communities.

Establishing a voice in local planning partnerships – Colleges need to ensure that their voices are heard on local economic and social planning partnerships. Colleges are the main provider of skills training in many localities and they therefore need to be represented on Local Enterprise Partnerships, playing a prominent role in developing local skills strategies.

Developing a new curriculum – A new push into outreach activities requires new thinking about the curriculum. Providing routes and pathways to further learning is central but it needs to be a highly flexible curriculum built to respond to the ‘any time, any place’ requirements of young people and new media technologies. Nevertheless, the self-confidence and motivational stimulus that people gain from group-based activities should not be forgotten. Hence the need to blend online, distance learning with campus-based or even residential activities.

A more flexible funding system – While the government has introduced new flexibilities, funding is still constrained by too many rules and regulations as to what is to be spent on which activity. If all colleges are to be innovative and entrepreneurial there needs to be a more flexible funding system giving colleges more discretion to be able to allocate resources as they see fit. In our interim report we argued for a number of changes to the funding system, including more discretion on budget allocations and making colleges,

like universities, subject to three-year rolling budgets. These ideas have received broad support from the government and John Hayes, the Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, told delegates at the AoC conference in November that they were exploring both possibilities.

A new approach to governance and accountability – Developing the community agenda for colleges requires a new approach to governance and accountability. The new Foundation Code of Governance for colleges, due to be introduced in 2012, sets out a new norm for community engagement. This might be developed to include guidance on ways in which colleges should engage with and account to their various communities, including good practice guidelines, benchmarks and performance indicators. One possibility, we suggest, might be to extend this section of the code into a fully fledged ‘compact’ negotiated with their local communities, setting out explicitly what the college aimed to achieve over, say, a three-year period and what the expected outcomes would be, and for the college to report on this on an annual basis.

A shared agenda

The commission’s final report summarises 10 months of research, analysis and discussion, and suggests a way forward. In essence, we believe that colleges can not only help people into jobs through education and skills training but, by being proactive in their communities, can also harness the energy of those communities towards positive outcomes which, in turn, promote health, happiness and social cohesion. In doing so, the key is for colleges to work in partnership, whether with business, charities, local authorities or other public-sector organisations. In our interim report we referred to this partnership working as ‘a shared agenda’ and since its publication we have seen colleges, their support bodies and central and local government all pledging their support. We believe it is an exciting agenda which provides a route to renewed and revitalised communities, but it is a shared agenda and we hope this support will enable it to be taken forward, turning vision into reality in many communities.

Margaret Sharp, Baroness Sharp of Guildford, has sat on the Liberal Democrat benches of the House of Lords for 13 years. For much of that time she has been a spokesman on education and has taken a particular interest in further education.

Documents summarising the evidence and case studies as well as all the reports produced during the inquiry are available from the commission website: <http://www.niace.org.uk/current-work/colleges-in-their-communities-inquiry>
