



Seminar Two – 9 November 2006

Leading the creation of public value

Notes of discussion

1. This paper sets out the aims of the seminar, summarises the presentation and the key themes of the discussion, drawing out at the beginning the implications for leadership and leadership development. John Benington's slides and the draft chapter from his forthcoming book accompany these notes on the website and provide further detail to complement these notes. The notes of discussion do not attribute any views to individuals and do not seek to imply consensus where none was reached.

The aim of this note is to:

- Capture the range of perspectives to promote understanding of thinking on leadership for public value across the FE system
 - Identify areas that merit further analysis, discussion or clarification
 - Provide the basis for further discussions and developments.
2. The notes will inform future discussion in the seminar series and will be part of the overview and briefing provided to Bill Rammell MP, Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, who will be the keynote speaker at the final seminar in March 2007. The notes will be placed on CEL's website and will also be sent directly to colleagues in the DfES and in other national agencies.

Aims of the seminar

3. The aims of the seminar were:
 - To explore the theory of public value and its implications for leadership and leadership and organisational development
 - To explore how the thinking relates to longer-term sector and public service reforms including self-regulation, more devolved systems of accountability and self-sustaining systems of improvement
 - To consider how thinking requires further development.
4. Of those who completed an evaluation form (two-thirds of participants), 84% rated the event *extremely valuable* and the remainder as very valuable. Everyone felt that the aims were achieved and that at least one aim was achieved *excellently*.

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Presentation by Professor John Benington – a summary

5. There is a growing view at senior levels in government that we have reached the high water mark of top-down performance management. While it is deemed to have been effective in addressing poor performers, it has not mobilised continuous improvement and innovation across the mass of public service providers. There is recognition of the need to replace top-down approaches by more devolved *self-sustaining systems of improvement*.¹
6. While such an orientation is welcome, it is less clear what this might mean in practice. It could for example, suggest that top-down pressure from government be replaced by pressure from customers expressed through greater choice; or it could suggest a stronger communal voice exerting pressure on services. Both these options are evident in the recent White Paper on local government² which emphasises the importance of both groups of *users* and of *citizens* having greater power to express demands.
7. This government has sought to achieve the benefits of combining economic prosperity with social justice, and both a market-led and a state-led approach to public service reform, but has lacked a clear body of theory to support its approach. This may therefore be a moment when there is potential for new thinking to influence how the public service reform agenda is taken forward. The concept of public value could provide the theoretical underpinning for a new approach.³
8. There are two important elements in defining public value:
 - **What does the public value?**

There is a need to constantly check what is *valued* from the point of view of the public. The notion of *valued* as distinct from what is *desired* is important – to test what the public values, we need to know what people are prepared to give up in exchange for that outcome/service. Establishing what is valued therefore suggests a process of debate and challenge rather than a simple process of choice without personal consequence. Exploring what the public values is a counter to producer-domination of public services. However, the legitimate knowledge, judgement and voice of the public service profession has been dangerously challenged and its authority needs to be brought back and given its rightful place in deliberation.
 - **What adds value to the public sphere?**

Here account must be taken not just of current customers but of future generations and of those who don't have voice. This is the basis for the use of the term *public value* as distinct from *social value* – in Benington's definition "public" encompasses the whole of the public sphere, with the state and the market as subsets of the whole. Public value is not only created by the state, but also by the private market and by the voluntary and informal community sectors. This approach challenges people to think of themselves as citizens, part of the public sphere, as well as individual consumers within a marketplace.

Who creates public value?

9. This broad notion of the public sphere means that public value can be created by any part of it – public, private or third sector. It indicates too that a proper job for a public leader or manager is to orchestrate a range of different stakeholders from different sectors and from different levels of government, and from the informal community, to harness their energies and commitments, and to get their alignment, around a clear sense of the public value outcomes that need to be pursued.

¹ See the report by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit - [Discussion Paper: The UK Government's Approach to Public Service Reform](#)

² *Strong and prosperous communities*, Department for Communities and Local Government, October 2006 - <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1503999>

³ See Moore, M.H. (1995) *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*. Harvard University Press

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How is public value created?

10. Although public value is created in different ways in different services, in many areas public service outcomes are generated by co-creation – in education and health/well-being for example, co-creation is essential – learning cannot be sprayed on to a passive recipient. Predominantly public value is co-created at the front line – ie by the teachers and trainers, health workers, and the police, etc who work directly with the public. Therefore the pyramid which places government at the pinnacle and the deliverers of services at the bottom needs to be inverted.
11. The strategic triangle⁴ expresses visually the three dimensions that need to be aligned in order to generate public value:
 - *Strategic goals/public value outcomes*
 - public managers need to spend time, through a careful process of engagement and deliberation with the public, working out and reaching agreement if possible about what public value outcomes they should seek to add to the public sphere.
 - *Authorising environment*
 - this is not limited to the formal mandate gained from election or appointment. Authorisation to pursue public value outcomes often requires negotiation between a range of different stakeholders, and the creation of a coalition of interests built through deliberation and discussion. It will involve different partners depending upon the public value outcomes being pursued but might include securing authorisation from democratically elected representatives as well as leaders of informal associations within civil society, as well as leaders and managers from public, private and voluntary sector organisations.
 - *Operational capacity*
 - there is an absolute necessity to ensure that the capacity exists to achieve the public value outcomes proposed – finance, skilled and trained staff, technology and equipment that is fit for the purpose.

Implications for leadership

12. Warwick's Institute of Governance and Public Management (IGPM) has been working with Ron Heifetz⁵ at Harvard who has developed a body of thinking on adaptive leadership. He points out that leaders are frequently expected to answer questions and solve problems for others – refusing to do so, and involving people in accepting shared responsibility for grappling with difficult dilemmas, is both difficult and important.
13. The leader's role is first to analyse and describe the change or adaptation in thinking and/or behaviour which is needed in the present context and then to engage the people with the adaptive challenge in joint problem solving. This creates discomfort and leaders need to regulate the temperature sensitively and work at a manageable pace in order to avoid burn-out or overload. Heifetz describes this as creating a *holding environment* which is challenging but safe, regulating the pressure felt by those they are leading. John also introduced the notion of a heat-shield that leaders can hold to deflect away from frontline staff the external interventions and political heat that can distract them from achieving agreed public value outcomes.
14. Listening to the voices of those without authority is another skill he highlights for leaders – ensuring that hierarchies do not filter out important points of view and perceptions from those at the front line. He also argues the need for leaders to move continuously between the *balcony and the battlefield*, keeping in view both the big strategic picture, the helicopter overview of a situation, and also the messiness of the battle at the operational front line, where people are dug in *up to their necks in muck and bullets*.

⁴ See John Benington's PowerPoint presentation - slide number 34

⁵ See also slides 35-38 on John's PowerPoint slides

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Themes from discussion

15. The discussion examined a number of dimensions of the discussion introduced by John Benington. The following points aim to capture it through themes that recurred during the discussion rather than by a chronological account of the points made and issues raised. Given CEL's role in leadership development, we have a responsibility to capture issues that need to inform our leadership development programmes and activities and therefore we draw these out first.

Key messages on leadership

16. The key messages that emerged during the discussion which have a particular bearing on leadership and leadership development can be summarised as follows:
 - A key role for leaders seeking to maximise public value is to engage actively with customers and citizens to determine the outcomes that will add most value. Leaders need to exploit the head-room that they have and use their operational capacity creatively in order to take initiatives to deliver these outcomes.
 - Leaders need to constantly assess their context and the current initiatives and policy developments to make judgements about which to prioritise for implementation and which might not be sustainable and should be managed or resisted. The role of leadership therefore is not to respond equally and without question to all new opportunities and initiatives but to make judgements. Leaders therefore need the self-confidence to create a clear vision and sense of purpose for their institution as the basis for such judgements.
 - Leaders need to be able to move between the *balcony* and the *battlefield* – ie understand their world from the frontline perspective as well as having the strategic overview of where their organisation is moving. They also need to convey to the front line a clear sense of strategic direction.
 - Leaders are called upon to manage ambiguity and uncertainties including in government policy. This highlights the need to think carefully about the authorising environment in order to ensure that critical support exists for decisions made when there is ambiguity and uncertainty.
 - Current systems of accountability point leaders overwhelmingly towards Whitehall via the LSC. Public legitimacy for the FE system depends on the support not just of government, but of customers, citizens and taxpayers. Leaders need to consider how to maintain accountability to the centre while building greater credibility with their community and citizenry.
 - Leaders need skills in building coalitions and working in partnerships – both are central to approaches to developing public value and operating in a more networked FE system.
 - Government policy is in favour of responsive and personalised services. Leaders may find there is tension between providing services that are responsive to individual and local needs and the notion of universal services – ie there may be concern about *postcode lotteries*. Leaders need to ensure they have local authorisation for more customised solutions and services.
 - The capacity of leaders to engage in political and policy debate at national and at local level is likely to become increasingly vital and a prerequisite for more devolved responsibility and the move towards self-regulation.

The confidence and courage to exercise the power of leadership

17. Public value thinking reiterates strongly the need for leaders to exercise their authority and to lead the process of engaging actively with customers and citizens to determine the outcomes that will add most value.
18. Colleagues felt strongly that as strategic partners with government, leaders in the FE system must be powerful, creative and innovative. However, there was a feeling that the top-down reform process has discouraged them from displaying these qualities. Therefore a theme of discussion was whether leaders have the nerve and courage to take initiative or whether they have learnt to be compliant. Arguably the tendency of government to intervene and prescribe outcomes at a high level of detail discourages innovation and independence.

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19. Colleagues feel that they are being told what to do at a level of detail which is inappropriate and disempowering. One colleague suggested that the level of detailed 'advice' from LSC tempts leaders to want to simply give them the key. However it was also noted that the LSC often acts as a heat-shield that deflects intervention rather than a prism that magnifies it.
20. This sense of impotence needs to be understood in order for it to be managed and John suggested the following analysis. Aristotle identifies three forms of knowledge – technical knowledge (techne), conceptual knowledge (episteme) and practical knowledge or wisdom (phronesis). Government policy tends to focus overwhelmingly on technical knowledge and this has fostered a sense that true professionalism (which should encompass all three dimensions) is undervalued by government. This in turn encourages professions to behave as victims.
21. However, this is not universally the response across the public sector and some professions are challenging and mobilising. For example, the Directors of Social Services helped to write the Children's Bill with the government.
22. It was also pointed out that innovation and headroom can be achieved through the creative use of operational capacity and mobilisation of staff behind a strong vision – this is not always exploited sufficiently. It was also argued that the sector under-estimates its power and freedom. Viewed by someone who had worked inside a local authority, the FE system offers much greater room for manoeuvre and initiative.

The leadership space to create public value

23. We discussed from a number of perspectives whether leaders in the FE system have the flexibility or headroom to proactively seek to engage with their communities to determine the public service outcomes that would be most valued. There was concern that this approach might raise expectations that could not be met.
24. However the current discussions around self-regulation and the government's commitment to greater responsiveness could signal a serious intent to give providers greater flexibility. Public value thinking and the notion of carefully managing authorising environments could provide a useful framework to support greater self-regulation.

Leaders as a heat-shield or biological membrane?

25. The reference to a heat-shield led to a discussion about the organic nature of public sector ecologies. Self-regulating systems in biology are ones that take in nutrients and keep out poisons – a better image it was felt than a heat-shield. The biological image recognises the complexity of the process and the sensitivity needed in handling the external environment.
26. Like an organic membrane resisting poison, at times the job of leaders can also be to resist change where the implications are felt to be damaging to the ecology. An example given was a recent political preference for the creation of separate sixth form centres in colleges which now appears to have slipped from the current agenda. In this situation leaders are not necessarily leading change but protecting existing practice and resisting change.
27. This suggests that leaders constantly assess the status of initiatives and policy developments in order to make judgements about whether to act to ensure they happen or to ignore or resist them. The illustration indicates the power that leaders exercise in relation to policy implementation. It also illustrates that making change happen is much more complex, organic and unpredictable than a series of mechanical levers that can be pulled from Whitehall to the front line.
28. Colleagues found the image of leaders moving between the balcony and the battlefield a powerful one. The benefit was also pointed out of taking the balcony to the battlefield – it is very important to help those operating on the front line to have a sense of the bigger picture and of higher purpose.
29. Just as the front line needs to understand government strategy, so too Whitehall needs to understand and learn from the front line. In his presentation, John suggested that public value is mainly created at the front line, where there is direct engagement with citizens, rather than in Whitehall. This has implications for the way that the centre behaves, making it more important for the centre to be able to capture intelligence from the front line and learn about it in the centre so that it can inform policy thinking. Shorter and faster lines of communication are needed between the front line and the centre it was suggested.

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Handling ambiguity

30. The need to deal with ambiguity and change in government policy was highlighted a number of times in the discussion. There are tensions it was argued between economic and social priorities and between local and national priorities. It indicated on the one hand the uncertainty that leaders must live with, but also suggested room for manoeuvre. When there is ambiguity, strategic judgements need to be made.
31. A recurring area of discussion was around the relative importance of economic and social priorities. Some felt that they were of equal importance in government thinking, others that the economic priority is over-whelming and that the public value of adult education is not recognised by government. In addition there were differing views about where public opinion rests on the issue.
32. There seemed to be distinctive views about the extent to which government currently is ignoring public opinion. For example one colleague argued that there is plenty of evidence to support the case that learning creates wider benefits than simple learning outcomes and that this supports the case for spending on traditional adult education. Current policy, it was argued, is putting the learning capacity of adults at risk. However another colleague described government as having made a legitimate choice in favour of learning for employment as distinct from learning for leisure.
33. It was also suggested that if asked, the public on the street outside would not be prepared to spend more on adult education. Spending on adult education has not become an issue of widespread public concern. Another colleague suggested that if given the choice between spending on adult education or Iraq, the result would be very different. However it was recognised that leaders must frame choices and discussion within the parameters over which they have control.
34. The discussion highlighted that the process of discussion and authorisation for action is complex; the way in which choice is framed is vital to the outcomes; we need to continue to influence and make sense of policy thinking in government; and, although we are arguably inexperienced at doing so in this sector, we should consider how to influence wider public opinion more systematically from our different vantage points.

Clarity of purpose and vision

35. It was argued that some of the most remarkable outcomes of leadership have been achieved by modest and mild people, not charismatic figures – for these people clarity of purpose and thought is the source of their power. However it was suggested that there is a lack of self-confidence among leaders in the FE system to own a clear vision and sense of purpose. How can we build this sense of confidence in our leadership?

Sources of authority and lines of accountability

36. We discussed where leaders focus in terms of sources of authority and lines of accountability. Currently the overwhelming source of authority and direction for accountability are perceived to be government, with an increasing but still very limited authority from and accountability towards existing customers (individuals and employers). Public value thinking shifts that balance of attention towards not just the customer, but towards the citizen and taxpayer as well.

Authorising environments

37. The point was made that the authorising environment in the Learning and Skills Sector (or FE system as it's increasingly called) is enormously complex, and consequently saps *energy*. Because the FE system is established as a national service delivered locally, its accountability systems and processes are at odds with those that might be designed to create public value through local deliberation and engagement.
38. Therefore action to engage local opinion is on top of existing accountability systems adding to the burden, whereas simpler or more consonant systems might release energy. But we did note that authorisation is not needed from all quarters – there is a judgement to be made about when sufficient authorisation has been gained.

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Leading in coalitions

39. The process of building coalitions in order to secure sufficient authorisation was described as like leading an orchestra where each of the players contributes to the overall melody. One colleague described the challenges of leadership in this environment as *lateral leadership*. It demands the capacity to lead without formal authority or hierarchy.

Public value or social value?

40. There was a discussion about whether the terminology of *public value* was helpful. It was suggested that the term *public* has lost respect in the media and in popular discourse. An argument in favour of *social value* was that public relates to the individual or personal whereas social relates to society and the citizen. However the counter-argument was that the term *public* as John Benington defined it, describes the whole public sphere we are talking about and that *economic, social and political value* are all dimensions of *public value*. It was argued that public and public service are terms that should be reclaimed and given the respect that they deserve.

The importance of business in the authorising environment for FE

41. It was stressed that the private business sector has a significant role to play within the authorising environment for the FE system. It was suggested that the public sector sometimes does not sufficiently respect the role of business in wealth creation - it should be more highly respected by the public sector and acknowledged in discussion about spending public resources generated through taxation. In addition, the FE system's role in relation to employability and vocational education means that authorisation by the business community is particularly important – it should be sought and harnessed at national and local level.
42. This discussion also provoked the question - *have we got the economic narrative right yet?* Not everyone felt that Foster had achieved this in his report. Is there further work that should be commissioned to really make the economic case for the FE system, or will that emerge from Lord Leitch's review of skills?

Promoting engagement and deliberative discussion

43. For the preferences of communities or customers to be influential, politicians need to be prepared to relinquish some control. Elected representatives have a legitimacy and mandate, whereas at the moment deliberative local discussions are not recognised as part of a democratic process – ie participative democratic processes need to secure legitimacy alongside representative democratic processes.
44. Colleagues discussed the dilemmas and pitfalls of getting real engagement with citizens. Several examples suggested that it could increase and highlight conflict and value differences. For example, the process could highlight where professional values and customer or citizen values diverge. Added to the narrow range of flexibility available this could lead to conflicts with national priorities and policies; with the professional ethics of public service leaders; and with the preferences of their communities.
45. Another concern was the difficulty of getting engagement on anything beyond short-term and pragmatic decisions - a lack of confidence in the community to engage and make a positive difference. Engaging local people in discussing a longer-term project to enhance the public sphere felt very hard to achieve for some while others suggested there was a hunger for long-term debate.
46. There are dangers of raising unrealistic expectations and it was argued that there has been a history of this in the sector. For example, Helena Kennedy's report⁶ on widening participation led to both raised expectations among clients and the workforce and led to expenditure on capacity-building to meet this particular policy agenda. Although the policy was never stood down or rejected by government, it was not actively pursued and was superseded by other priorities. This was described as creating credibility issues with clients.

⁶ *Learning Works*, Helena Kennedy QC, FEFC, June 1997 [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ERO/records/js5/JS%205%20\(59\).pdf](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ERO/records/js5/JS%205%20(59).pdf)

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47. It also illustrates how leaders can be left trying to handle uncertainties created by shifts in government policy, feeling disempowered as a result. The challenge for leaders is compounded by the tendency for government to add new priorities and policy rather than explicitly declaring a change of direction or dropping existing priorities.

Local responsiveness or a postcode lottery?

48. There was also perceived to be a tension between the government's stated wish for public services to be responsive to local needs, and the public concern about postcode lotteries – is government prepared to handle the political fall-out of greater diversity of services? Flexibility for one person can be seen as unfairness for another.
49. It was suggested that the ambiguity in policy needs to be recognised and dealt with by government. A settlement or reconciliation could be achieved by providing some local flexibility and acceptance that there should be greater space for negotiation about the detail of how policy is implemented. Politicians and sector leaders need to be geared up to defend the diverse public service outcomes achieved.

Influence of the media

50. It was noted that providers in the FE system are frequently successful at creating public value by fostering diverse, tolerant and cohesive environments. However irresponsible and negative publicity about Muslims has recently created media influenced disharmony. How could this be addressed? One suggestion was that when professionals talk to the media they tend to be too cautious and use too much jargon rather than *telling it like it is* and being *open and crunchy*. Clarity and simplicity of message will often shift media attitudes.

National and local influence

51. There was some uncertainty about whether we were arguing for either national or local voice. On balance we did not argue that a choice should be made, rather we explored how we need to think further about the balance between the two and how they influence one-another. We do need government endorsement for action, but the voice of the community including employers and business can influence government, its agencies and national policies – these need grounding and legitimacy too. So there is a real issue about the sector needing to develop its capacity to engage in political and policy debate at national and at local level.
52. The voice of the college is heard loudly in the locality - and can be amplified to national level by engaging with local MPs, for example. MPs are also useful allies for those working in local authorities, but working across the whole of the local authority agenda is very complex, and not sufficiently connected.
53. The power of stories about change at the local level and the impact and contribution of the FE system should be maximised to enhance reputation. Related to this the question was asked whether providers are sufficiently engaged with their local authority – it was suggested that this should be a very significant focus although it was argued that this is already the case.
54. Shouldn't we be thinking of college principals for example as managers in the college but also as active leaders in the community? Demonstrating power and influence at a local level gives power in the national arena. This could help us to address the perception that the voice of the FE system is not heard.

And summing up...

55. In summing up discussion, it was suggested that key dimensions of public value thinking that need to be grasped and developed include the following:
- Public value thinking focuses attention on how to secure *agency* and *authority* for action, to help us step away from the sense of impotence that can characterise public sector behaviour; it provides us with conceptual frameworks and ideas such as the strategic triangle and holding environments which can help us to exercise greater agency with safety, authority and legitimacy.

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- Public value thinking also urges us to look outwards and downwards to our communities for authority, not just upwards to Whitehall, and it points us towards the potential for leaders to make a real contribution to a joined up public service in a local area or context. This is another way of promoting and delivering the wider benefits of learning – by working in explicit partnership with other public services (health, social services, local government regeneration strategies, etc) we can deliver the learning dimension of a wide range of public value outcomes. The DCLG White Paper provides a positive impetus and possible levers to promote joined up local services. The FE system must play its part in that new scenario.
- Public value thinking brings into sharp relief the fact that if government wants more responsive, engaged public services, then leaders need flexibility and head-room to respond. Capacity to take initiative at the front line is essential if public services are to deliver their promise. The current work to explore self-regulation for the FE system, with DfES support, is therefore extremely timely. The opportunity must be grasped to explore the potential of public value theory alongside the move to devolve greater power to the front line and move towards self-regulation.

Questions to explore further

56. A number of questions were raised which should be explored further:

- What are the kinds of mechanisms and approaches that leaders can use to get effective dialogue and engagement with the community while maintaining service values and mission and managing expectations? (See paragraphs 32-34, 43-46)
- How can we use public value thinking to manage/enhance sector reputation both locally and nationally? (See paragraph 50-54)
- How should we develop public value thinking to support self-regulation? (See paragraph 22)
- Have we got the right narrative about the economic value of learning? (See paragraph 42)

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Seminar participants

Participant	Job Title	Organisation
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Dr Ann Williams	Principal	West Suffolk College
Asha Khemka	Principal and Chief Executive	West Nottinghamshire College
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Caroline Mager	Director of Strategic Policy	Centre for Excellence in Leadership
Claire Mycock	Head of Adult and Community Learning	Bedfordshire County Council
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Dr David Collins CBE	Principal	South Cheshire College
Dr Edward Sallis	Principal & Chief Executive	Highlands College
Godfrey Glyn	Principal	Barton Peverill Sixth Form College
Graham Moore OBE	Principal	Stoke-on-Trent College
John Brennan	Chief Executive	Association of Colleges
Lesley Harry	Head of Service	Derbyshire Adult Community Education Service
Lynne Sedgmore CBE	Chief Executive	Centre for Excellence in Leadership
Maggie Galliers	Principal	Leicester College
Margaret Bennett	Director of Communications and Partnerships	Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning
Michael Oakes	Principal	South Downs College
Professor Nigel Bennett	Professor in Leadership and Management in Education	The Open University
Neil Bromley	Principal	North East Worcestershire College
Richard Bolsin	General Secretary	Workers Educational Association
Richard Chambers	Principal	Lambeth College
Rob Wye	Director of Strategy and Communication	LSC
Dame Ruth Silver DBE	Principal	Lewisham College
Sally Dicketts	Principal	Oxford & Cherwell College
Shahidul Miah	Consultant	Rockpools
Wally Brown CBE	Principal	Liverpool Community College

Seminar chair: **Libby Purves OBE, Broadcaster, novelist, journalist and commentator**

Seminar keynote speaker: **Professor John Benington, Professor in Public Management & Policy, University of Warwick**