

Constancy through changing times

Richard Goss, Assistant Director, CfBT Education Trust

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A colleague from Huntercombe Young Offender Institution, where CfBT provides the education service, asked me recently whether the Skills for Life Improvement Programme would be affected by the forthcoming changes at QIA. We have had a few similar enquiries from staff working throughout the learning and skills sector and can assure you that the Skills for Life Improvement Programme will continue without disruption for the foreseeable future. Apart from the logo, full continuity is expected for all providers and other organisations currently engaged in the Improvement Programme.

From 1 April a new sector-led organisation will be formed, bringing together the work of the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) and the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL). Dame Ruth Silver DBE has already taken up the role of chair of the new

body and is seconded one day a week from her role as Principal of Lewisham College in south east London. She said:

'This new organisation will bring to the sector – in time – a longed-for vision, autonomy and authority. I am absolutely delighted to be its inaugural Chair and very much look forward to working with our great colleagues to contribute to and shape its success. This isn't just any new organisation – it's our organisation.'

When awarding Ruth an honorary doctorate of education at London South Bank University, vice chancellor Professor Deian Hopkin said, 'Ruth Silver trained at the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations in Adolescence and Transition and worked at the Woodberry Down Child Guidance Clinic. She taught in Hackney, worked part time for ILEA, worked for the BBC on community youth development, and was a civil servant working on the YTS scheme. She also acted as a consultant to Sir Geoffrey Holland working on issues of personal effectiveness among adolescents. She then joined mainstream further education, first at Southwark College and then in Newham College of Further Education where she was Vice Principal before becoming, in 1991, Principal and Chief Executive of Lewisham College.'

From the outset, Ruth Silver has demonstrated a clear and determined educational philosophy. She has described further education as 'the adaptive layer' which deals with the learning challenges thrown up by wider economic and social change, affirming:

'We are resolute doers and creative problem-solvers. We are proud of our enduring skills and traditions but we are agile, ambitious and adept at doing new things to meet new needs.'

She has sometimes called this the 'mezzanine concept' – the

notion of a bridge between levels; between, one might say, disadvantage and success. And a further key is the link between talent, creativity and employment. She has been critical of the narrow prescription in the curriculum:

'We need vocational, non-academic and practical, hands-on learning, with a skills rather than an academic focus to bring out of young people all their wonderful qualities of creativity and sensitivity and give them an appetite for the future.'

The process of selecting a chief executive for the new organisation is under way and an announcement will be made in due course.

Neil Bates, vice-chair of the new organisation's interim board and chief executive of Prospects Learning Foundation, said, 'We have been able to appoint one of the most highly regarded and talented leaders in our sector to head this new organisation. Our task now is to build on the excellence which exists within many colleges, private training providers, and the not-for-profit and voluntary-sector organisations so that we can create a learning and skills system which is genuinely responsive, learner-focused and world class.'

All at the Skills for Life Improvement Programme wish the new organisation well in its mission to drive up the quality of teaching, learning, achievement and progression.

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