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## News Release

Date: 4 January 2010	Embargo: For Immediate Release
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### **New quangos alone won't improve quality of training**

The creation of two new quangos will do little to improve the role of further education in supporting the needs of employers, ministers have been warned.

The comments come in a series of recommendations in a report from the New Engineering Foundation, an influential charity working closely with colleges to improve their responsiveness to the needs of employers.

It warns Government that changes in the funding arrangements for colleges, which will see the replacement of the Learning and Skills Council, do little to improve the fundamental weaknesses in planning.

The LSC funds further education and vocational training from age 16. Its role is being taken over by local government under the guidance of the new Young People's Learning Agency for the 16-18 age group and by the new Skills Funding Agency for 19-plus.

The report – *Planning and Funding Cycles for the Further Education Sector* - says: "The FE sector should develop a clearer vision about how it sees the sector maximising its contribution to meeting the economic, social and skills priorities of the country.

"This vision should then be used as a basis for ongoing dialogue with the FE Ministers and Government departments, funding bodies and other stakeholders to ensure the FE sector is positioned as an integral and highly-valued part of education system."

The NEF, whose chief executive Professor Sa'ad Medhat is a close advisor to ministers, warns the new structures do little to sweep aside the fundamental barriers to making colleges more responsive.

The report adds: "The changes in the skills landscape present many challenges and opportunities for the FE sector.

"The intent behind all of these changes is to streamline the skills system; however, experience would suggest that the tendency has been to build complexity on to itself through constantly developing mechanisms to support an ever changing array of bodies and agencies that deliver a wide range of funded programmes and initiatives."

The report suggests colleges are under pressure to focus too much on the one-year cycle of planning which results from the way in which they are funded, at the expense of the longer-term vision.

While calling for a reduction in the number of national agencies, to reduce the complexity of the system in which further education must operate, the report says longer-term approaches are needed within individual colleges.

In addition to the two funding bodies, the NEF report says there are many overlapping organisations which claim to improve quality but these are too numerous to have a clear remit.

The result is that colleges are overburdened with red tape and trapped in a cycle of going through the motions to satisfy the short-term objectives of audit, targets and funding applications.

“The FE sector is characterised by strong operational rather than strategic leadership,” it says.

The report includes the following key recommendations.

**Government should:**

Ensure more coordination between the Department for Children, Schools & Families and the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills – which both have responsibility for further education;

Ensure both departments have a system for liaising regularly with colleges over the development of long-term strategy;

And, reduce the number of awarding bodies and increase the awarding powers of colleges themselves.

**FE colleges should:**

Ensure governors have the necessary capabilities to be effective in their role;

Put more emphasis on creating a long-term business strategy;

And, include resources for business development in their financial planning.

Many of the obstacles placed in the way of progress under the current arrangements for further education are outlined by another report, also just published by the New Engineering Foundation, titled *“The English FE System – Achieving Excellence, Fulfilling Potential”*.

Its observations, resulting from consultation with college principals and senior managers, echo widespread concerns that the Government, rather than students and trainees, has become the all-powerful “customer” of post-16 education.

As a result, it claims, the pressure to follow targets in order to secure funding has stifled creativity. Individual managers, while charged with achieving value for money, have been prevented from doing so as a result of red tape designed to achieve just that.

The report says: "The intention was always to place the customer at the centre. But the paradox is that, over time, centralising the power to run services like the education system has strengthened bureaucracy, weakened the ability to fine-tune the education service and led to the Government itself becoming the customer of the service provider."

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**Notes for editors:**

- The New Engineering Foundation (NEF) was established in 2004 as a grant awarding charity that supports the development of Vocational Education in science, engineering and technology through providing policy advice and advocacy, undertaking and commissioning research studies and impact analyses, and developing and delivering educational programmes and resources.
- Link to the Planning and Funding Cycles for the Further Education Sector Paper can be found here:  
<http://www.neweng.org.uk/resources/Planning&FundingCyclesforFESector.pdf>
- Link to The English FE System – Achieving Excellence, Fulfilling Potential Paper can be found here: <http://www.neweng.org.uk/resources/ExcellenceinFE.pdf>
- Both reports will be launched at the New Engineering Foundation's Awards Ceremony on **8 January 2010** at the Royal Society (6-9 Carlton House Terrace, London).