

Further Education, Future Prosperity?: The Implications of Marketisation on Further Education Working Practices

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Abstract

This paper examines how the marketised funding system of vocational further education is affecting lecturers' working practices and professional integrity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a number of lecturing staff and managers within two vocational areas at an English FE college to examine the implications of working under the current funding regime. The conclusions drawn reflect the complexity of working within FE showing how lecturers are frequently placed in a professional dilemma between securing future funding (by ensuring high levels of retention and achievement) and compromising their professional integrity and working practices in order to do so. A key finding here was the inherent tension between professional integrity and funding requirements apparently directly opposing 'good' practice. This means FE professionals experience what Whitehead (1989) called 'a living contradiction' in their working lives, increasing stress levels and diminishing their sense of professionalism.

Keywords:

Further Education, FE Funding, Marketisation, Professional Integrity, Living Contradiction, Vocational Education.

Introduction

In recent years as education budgets tighten further following austerity measures (Adams 2014; University and College Union 2013), the marketised further education (FE) sphere has experienced greater financial pressures than ever before. Alongside this, FE continues to be subject to longer term policy and structural changes affecting those who learn and teach within it (Ball 2009; Coffield et al. 2005). It is in this context that this paper aims to highlight some of the implicit connotations that have evolved due to the funding structure and the creeping privatisation of the sector.

However, many commentators remain reluctant to question the system's effectiveness as it is deemed to be what the country needs within political and social discourse, both financially and to compete on a global level (Collini 2013). Likewise, this paper does not simply seek to criticise *per se*, but to identify tacit issues that could be having damaging consequences for the UK economy. As Lister (2000) argued some time ago, this is a phenomenon 'brooking no opposition' as no-one wants to appear outdated or old fashioned, a dangerous notion which justifies research into the area in light of this being an ongoing issue nearly two decades later.

Demonstrating how macro-societal changes in political ideologies and related policy initiatives can have an effect on the micro aspects of implementation, we seek to explore whether the policy aims for funding have been met, or whether there are more negative connotations, for lecturers' working practices and, as a consequence, the general quality of FE courses. A 'bottom-up' approach has intentionally been adopted throughout this research to best understand how policy is filtered down through the meso-levels and the effect this is having for lecturers and learners and the relationships they build in the classroom. Ball *et al.* (2012) refer to the process of 'policy enactment' to describe how the intentions of the policy makers are not necessarily what gets played out in practice, and this study explores that process in an FE setting. The data was collected by one researcher (X) to minimise concerns over standardisation, but then analysed in tandem with (Y), ensuring the mitigation of subjective inferences.

Whilst we acknowledge that higher education, adult education and secondary schooling suffer similar issues (Ball 2015), to ensure clarity of focus and sufficient space for the necessarily detailed analysis, this study focuses on 16-18 provision across two vocational programmes at one college to limit the range of variables.

Background

This paper seeks to evaluate the implications of changes to funding policies on notions of 'quality' in FE colleges. In essence we are seeking to discover whether the current state of marketised funding is achieving its declared aim of improving standards through direct accountability and competition (Ball 2010), or whether there has been a negative impact resulting in many courses lacking both rigour and quality as lecturers are under increasing pressure to ensure more students achieve. Whilst programme design cannot be ignored as a factor in their quality, this paper investigates how funding has affected the implementation and completion of college courses under the current financing structure rather than analysing the rigour with which courses are designed.

Statistically, vocational courses tend to show high levels of success and achievement, with many colleges celebrating near 100% pass rates for their learners (National Audit Office 2013; Skills Funding Agency 2014). However, the degree to which this is based on merit is questionable when confounding variables are assessed given the pressures faced by lecturing staff and managers to ensure the high levels of achievement necessary to secure future funding. Using the research question 'is the funding structure devaluing the grading system in order to maintain a perception of quality through grade achievement?', this dilemma is investigated in order to establish whether the current funding requirements are encouraging lecturers to inflate success rates on vocational courses.

An Erroneous Position?

Before exploring the historical relevance of this research it is worth noting two confounding elements pressurising the contemporary FE environment in particular. Firstly, FE has always been the 'Cinderella sector' of education (Randle and Brady 2006), continuing to receive less money per student than other sectors. In fact the BBC (2015) reported colleges are now at a critical point with a financial crisis looming due to the funding structure used. Despite the recent rise in the compulsory education and training participation age, effectively

requiring young people to engage in education up to the age of 18 from 2015 (Department for Education 2012), post-16 education funding has not been ring-fenced or protected from austerity measures like pre-16 education has, resulting in significant cuts in provision (Institute for Learning 2014).

In addition to these issues colleges also face bigger financial overheads including higher employer pension contributions than non-FE competitors (e.g. school sixth forms) meaning greater corporate costs (Association of Colleges 2014). These issues could be tackled by treating all educational facilities catering to the same age group equally (Mortimore 2013).

This is important here as the intention of our paper is to analyse whether the pressure from funding is affecting the very way lecturers execute their role, and portraying a false image of success. This in turn has accentuated colleges' need to retain learners and secure high success figures as it is these that encourages the recruitment of new students and ensures future funding.

Secondly, (compounding this problem further, in a complex juxtaposition), FE serves a select group of students who have often 'failed' or 'been failed' by previous educational experiences (McFadden 1995; Waller 2006); they may have a wider variety of learning needs and/or may be defensive after negative earlier classroom experiences. This means they are potentially a more difficult group of students to teach, emphasising the need for lecturers to forge strong, inspirational relationships with the students (Coffield *et al.* (2007)

Basing funding on retention and achievement removes the very foundations of these relationships.

Policy History

Prior to the 1990s funding was regionally allocated via the Local Education Authority and based on expected numbers of student enrolments, and unrelated to performance figures or

outcomes. Neo-liberal economic pressures bought a new privatised funding methodology justified economically as utilising the three E's of 'good management'; 'economy, efficiency and effectiveness', securing taxpayers' value for money (Hoyle and Wallace 2007), and ensuring greater accountability for those providing education, which in turn improved quality. This was enacted largely through the introduction of two major reforms issued by the then Department for Employment. Namely the 1988 'Employment for the 1990s' White Paper, and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which represented the first attempts to introduce competition into FE (Furlong 2005). For Gleeson (1999:37) this 'reconstituted colleges as autonomous ...enterprises...with power invested in the Principal as Chief Executive', and began the dual funding stream ideology still employed today.

Panchamia (2013) highlighted one of the most pertinent features of this new system was the emphasis on 'output related funding', a concept omitted from previous funding strategies. The intention was not just to encourage providers to recruit more students, as previously, but rather to maximise student retention and achievement (Gillard 2011).

This developed throughout the late 1990s as New Labour's Third Way took shape. 'Its advocates regard markets or 'quasi-markets' as appropriate and expedient structures to raise service standards and improve productivity in public-sector institutions' (Smith 2007:54). This move was been captured in the political discourse of the time whereby 'standards', 'achievement' and 'retention' became synonymous with educational discussions throughout 1998 (TES 1999). This terminology, which is still in use today, was noted by Davies (1999:4) who argued that 'Under New Labour 'standards' has replaced 'curriculum' as the discursive hub of educational policy'.

So the New Right attempted to reduce the welfare state and promote individual choice in a free market, whilst after 1997 New Labour created a competitive state which largely emulated business practices rather than prioritising social justice concerns (Ball 2009).

Although masked by minor structural changes, two decades on, the fundamental nature of FE finance remains essentially the same.

Current Funding

Student numbers are collected close to the start of the academic year, (on the census date after six weeks) which form the basis of the funding equation; the higher the numbers the greater the potential funding. These student numbers are then re-counted at critical points throughout the year and any reductions are made accordingly. Currently November 24th is the census date where-by all students who are no longer likely to achieve must be withdrawn if serious financial consequences are to be avoided. However, the remaining students are only significant if they achieve their qualification, so both achievement and retention become important. It therefore follows that the overall success of a course is calculated based on the retention and achievement of the students at certain points in the calendar, with a summative funding instalment made at the end of the academic year. This funding strategy, whilst fitting for a neo-liberal marketised environment, has refocussed concerns for future funding onto the lecturers themselves, as they have the potential to affect or alter course and college success figures. Students become assets that must complete if the input of resources including staff time are to be justified.

Exacerbating this further the funding allocations are calculated on a 'lagged' basis (UCU 2013), meaning year one student numbers will determine year two funding. Inevitably this is the simplest way for funding to be managed, but it can leave colleges with a financial deficit due to previous year's low enrolment. This makes it hard for colleges to break out of a downward pressure on numbers, in turn amplifying the need for lecturers to ensure high levels of retention and achievement and therefore 'success'.

A Marketised landscape

So it was hoped that by creating a culture of entrepreneurship and competition standards would 'raise up' (Johnson 2006). In reality however, this led to an increasing reliance on policy 'levers' such as performance targets, standards, audits, inspections and quality assurance processes (Newman 2001). This resulted in a highly stressful working environment where the focus shifts from teaching and learning to statistical monitoring, funding and targets (Ball 2009). Ofsted (2014), although not free from responsibility, reiterates this point acknowledging two factors that are preventing, rather than encouraging 'good' teaching and learning; firstly the sector has a culture driven by policies, strategies and documentation and not by practice in the classroom, and secondly, FE has become a highly competitive, data-driven environment which is overly focused on qualification aim as a measure of success.

Because of this Torrance (2007) suggests further education pedagogy has shifted rather than improved, meaning students are coached to understand the criteria and how to achieve within it rather than learn about the topic as a whole; that is, to engage in 'surface' rather than 'deep' learning (Biggs, 2003). As a result Ecclestone (2007:324) notes 'students are achieving more but learning less'. It is in this sense that education has become an accreditation delivery system of 'skills' which could be accused of perpetuating a false image of success in an increasingly easy to manipulate format, potentially jeopardising the integrity of the entire education system.

The marketised college system is effectively 'customer-led' meaning, as in any other sphere of consumerism, there is an underlying ethos of 'the customer is always right'. Today marketisation is visible throughout all educational provision, with higher education (HE) for instance experiencing similar, more vigorous changes in recent years as tuition fees have increased and the need to secure high achievement levels has risen since they are a key factor in the university league tables. As Collini (2011) notes now many undergraduate students now think of themselves as narrowly focused consumers, searching for 'value for

money', supposedly aided in their search by reference to metrics such as the National Student Survey data and other contributory factors in the HE league tables.

Methods

The starting point for this study was to analyse the impact funding pressures are having on working practices and pedagogy. A 'bottom-up' approach was intentionally adopted throughout this research in order to gain insight into how policy filters down through the meso-levels and the effect this is having for lecturers and learners and the relationships they build in the classroom. In order to investigate this within a qualitative, phenomenological tradition, both lecturers' and managers' perspectives were obtained through in-depth, semi-structured interviews to discover the extent that funding pressures affect day-to-day decisions made regarding student retention and achievement. This approach is best suited to educational research due to the complexity of the topic studied (Seidman 2013), as the meaning participants attribute to logistical issues faced and how these have wider implications for quality and curriculum design can be interpreted, providing a 'snap-shot' into the real experiences of those working within a marketised FE climate.

The intention was not to highlight internal managerial issues within the college but instead to focus on the elements experienced as a direct result of the funding structure, issues likely to be experienced by FE more widely. The research approach sought to decipher the meanings individuals attach to their own experiences, with the analysis of subjective discourses leading to a clearer understanding of how policy is interpreted and accommodated by educators, and the impact this has for teaching, learning and quality.

The research approach also allowed a degree of flexibility during interviews, to ensure emergent themes could be followed. This not only provided a greater degree of validity but also ensured any subjective biases affecting the research are reduced; it was each participant's discourse that largely defined the interview.

Detailed semi-structured interviews were conducted with six lecturers and three managers from across two of the college's vocational departments. All nine participants had vocational lecturing experience and were currently teaching, although the managers' contact time was, as expected, significantly less. The participants were chosen based on their vocational department, their working histories and personal characteristics, ensuring a broad range of experiences and demographic characteristics were represented. Variations included: age, number of years' experience in lecturing/managing, qualification status and previous vocational experience. These characteristics were deemed important as they may affect answers given during interview. All participants had a vocationally relevant career before their move into lecturing and shared a desire to impart a high level of knowledge to the future workforce, in order to ensure future success in their field. Whilst a range of characteristics have been included in the selection process, precise specific features of each participant have been withheld in an attempt to ensure their identities remain anonymous, an issue which affected participants' willingness to contribute to the research. The participants' number of years' experience are summarised in Table 1 below, though figures have been rounded to the nearest five years to further protect their identities.

Participant	Approximate number of years in role	Approximate number of years in FE	Department
Lecturer 1	5	5	A
Lecturer 2	5	5	A
Lecturer 3	5	5	B
Lecturer 4	5	5	B
Lecturer 5	10	15	B
Lecturer 6	10	25	A
Manager 1	5	20	A
Manager 2	10	10	B
Manager 3	5	10	N/A

Table 1 The participants

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and participants were offered the opportunity to review their transcripts to ensure they accurately reflected their views before any further analysis took place. The data was then analysed through multiple readings of the transcripts in order to become familiar with the content, allowing common themes to emerge and similarities and differences in responses to be identified. A 'bottom-up' approach to analysis was adopted, guided by the data itself rather than having preconceived themes. The thematic structure presented in the results section below developed from the commonality of language used by participants, which then became grouped by relevance into the overarching themes. This was important in ensuring interpretation was objective in nature, further strengthening the validity of interpretations made.

Ethical concerns

BERA's (2011) ethical guidelines underpinned the research process, and approval for the study was given by the researchers' own institutional ethics committee. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, raising concerns regarding the safeguarding of participants was paramount, with anonymity and confidentiality taking priority; the researchers felt a duty of care to the participants given that their opinions may be considered as challenging institutional policies. This anonymity was applied to the meso- and micro-levels anonymising the college itself, departments within it and the participants' personal identities. When presenting data each participant was also allocated a number, for example 'lecturer 1' in order to ensure a variety of participants' responses were represented during the discussion.

This type of research requires the primary researcher (X) to play an active role in the data collection and analysis (Oatey 1999), meaning there are inherent strengths and weaknesses linked to the personal contact between the researcher and participants. There are a range of critical issues that could be discussed here but in an attempt to further protect participants the specific nature of the relationship between the researchers and various participants has been omitted.

Interestingly however there is a continuous exchange of power which is being negotiated in any interview situation which is further exacerbated when there are professional or personal status imbalances. This was not an issue in the majority of interviews with lecturing staff but, upon reflection, appeared to affect the responses given by two of the three managers, who began from a position of reluctance to acknowledge potential issues in the funding methodologies used within the college and the related issues this may create. We need to remember when evaluating the findings that these college (middle) managers may also feel vulnerable to potential negative scrutiny by the college's senior managers.

Analysis of Results

Whilst a small scale study the results were conclusive in certain areas based on the research question; is the funding structure devaluing the grading system to maintain a perception of quality through grade achievement? During analysis two themes emerged from the data gathered, which provided crucial insight into the accuracy of grade achievement. Firstly how the pressure to retain and 'achieve' students affected lecturers' practices and secondly, based on language used by participants throughout the interviews, the associated pressure to 'get them (the students) through'.

Interestingly lecturing staff referred to themselves both as 'teachers' and 'lecturers' which seemed to be a reflection of how they perceived themselves and their job role. For consistency here they have been labelled 'lecturers', however language used throughout interview transcripts treats the terms as interchangeable.

Overwhelmingly results reflected a growing pressure to maintain student numbers and ensure all students 'achieve'.

“Well you are always aware of how many you can lose and once this has been ‘used up’, (which usually happens quite quickly), you have to pass them no matter what” (Lecturer 6).

In every interview lecturers showed concern for the way FE functions in relation to the pressures relating to funding. Retaining students was not as much of a concern as making sure those that were retained achieved, however retention did create some conflict.

“Well once the six weeks cut off has passed you have to keep them ‘cause if not we lose funding for them” (Lecturer 2). There was a clear consensus from participants that the pressure to secure funding is affecting working practices, particularly in relation to grade inflation, and although a direct correlation is difficult to establish, it seems the pressure to achieve all students once enrolled is amplified by the funding requirements. Whilst it is of course important to ensure students attain their intended qualifications, the pressure our participants cited beyond the natural desire educators have to facilitate their students’ educational journeys, or more personalised pressures such as the need to be seen to do a good job for individual gain such as promotion. The overwhelming consensus from the lecturers interviewed reflected that achievement figures have become dictated by the need to secure funding, and that practices were sometimes manipulated to the extent that students were given more than the specified level of guidance to pass their qualification.

This finding supports the previous work of Ecclestone (2007:324) who suggest ‘students are achieving more but learning less’ due to the spoon-feeding culture that has resulted from the pressure on achievement. This was reflected in the results whereby four of the six lecturers interviewed admitted that they were ‘fed up’ with having to ‘get students through’.

Not only are they learning less, it could even be suggested that they are actively developing a negative educational disposition from their experience, in respect of apathy and a lack of motivation.

“Oh yeah loads of students get better grades than they should (Lecturer 5).

“It means you are more likely to pass them than not if they are borderline, or worse!”
(Lecturer 4).

This was echoed by one manager who said

“Students can’t fail; all students must pass or we have done all that work for nothing... there’s no point if we don’t get any money for them” (Manager 2).

This reflects a wider concern related to the amount of support students should receive if their qualification is representative of the level of work completed. Although present in the answers given there was a lack of consensus on this issue, with some emphasising improvements that have been made.

“Well there’s always pressure for achievement and retention because of funding or Ofsted, but we always strive to keep students anyway. It’s about working out what’s best for them... making sure the first six weeks count so we get the right learners on the right courses...so quality has improved. It feels like there’s less of just getting them through” (Manager 2).

Whilst changes have been made it remains apparent that the degree to which funding requirements affect working practices is disproportionate to the student’s ability or personal achievements, in some cases.

Alternatively there was evidence that lecturers were not completely led by the funding requirements and despite pressure to pass students perceptions related to professional integrity was the main aspect that dictated personal working practices.

“I do experience stress and pressure to get the students through and make sure everyone passes but sometimes when I really feel a student does not deserve it I will not just let them pass...” (Lecturer 3).

This however again reinforces that the lecturing staff are not necessarily supported by the funding requirements but instead find themselves forced to operate in contention and opposition to it. A concept that could be accused of leaving professionals 'ontologically insecure' (Giddens 1991; Ball 2003), which in turn lowers morale and further degrades the value of the FE sector.

Another theme arising from the interviews was that it is now the college's financial agenda that had prioritised what was 'best' for the learner as statistical measuring has become paramount for securing future students, due to league tables and securing future funding. Every participant discussed students as 'numbers', whose successful achievement was needed to maintain levels of funding, a concept which reflects the earlier work of Crabtree *et al.* (2010) and Coffield (2007), who document how these priorities dominate working practices; these comparisons are particularly useful as their work was also carried out within FE.

"Student achievement is what it is all about, we are constantly asked about numbers and achievement figures and each loss or potential failure has to be documented and justified" (Lecturer 3)

There was little discussion regarding students' individual wants and needs, and although the expression 'right student, right course' mentioned, this again was with the college in mind rather than the learner.

"Teachers' lives are getting tougher they have more to teach and less time to teach it in, the importance of getting the right learner on the right course becomes paramount" (Manager 3).

We suggest the extent of this institutional target setting was a consequence of the managerialist pressures to an extent not previously witnessed in the sector. Further education colleges are not immune from the pressures of targeting and other crude performance measurements faced by other sectors, including more latterly HE as discussed

previously. As practitioners with some 30 years of engagement with the sector between us, we are aware of a time when unbiased advice could be provided to students without any financial concerns manipulating conversations between lecturers and potential students. This is an issue that also permeates both schools and universities as they try to retain as many students as possible to ensure high levels of student numbers progressing into their own sixth form provision or throughout their undergraduate studies (Guardian 2014).

Furthermore interview data highlighted how marketisation inevitably creates a 'blame' culture, whereby lecturing staff are seen as the problem if a student does not achieve rather than it being an intrinsic issue with the student themselves.

"The amount of times I've tried to suggest a student should not complete 'cause they just simply haven't put the work in and I've been told they have to and that I should have given them more input" (Lecturer 6).

This devalues lecturing staff who previously enjoyed greater professional autonomy and respect, allowing them to utilise their intellect and training to educate rather than having to consider wider political issues and the impact for their establishment.

Finally another distinction presented itself that was not necessarily predicted but evidenced throughout the data collected, namely the difference between answers given by lecturing staff and those of the managers. Without wishing to be too deterministic and suggest opinions were solely informed by the participants' roles, we feel that this articulates the fragmented position FE now operates within, as those in a managerial position must consider funding requirements meaning they are inherently more likely to perpetuate opinions that support future funding whilst lecturing staff are dealing with students, teaching and learning meaning their focus is inevitably somewhat different.

"Without the money we have no jobs so it is very important to ensure high levels of success" (Manager 1).

Put simply responses were broadly demarcated into acceptance (managers' opinion) and rejection (lecturers' opinion) of the current funding approaches. This seemed to reflect the inherent conflict associated with the marketisation of education; that of the inescapable tension between the ethos of education and the principles of marketisation, two indubitable notions that are inherently opposed. As one manager noted

“we are a business where each learner is £4,000... the organisation was split so there was a head of curriculum and a head of corporate, which meant there is an inherent tension between the two as one was responsible for the student experience and one for keeping the business afloat so naturally there was a conflict between the two” (Manager 3).

Although these two roles have since been amalgamated, the inherent tension remains the same and became evident in the answers given.

Lecturers were concerned that the students were often failing to do the work required to achieve, yet managers showed little regard for this.. For them 'good staff' got 'good results'

“High levels of success are a reflection of what's happening in the classroom, a good teacher usually gets good results” (Manager 1).

This unsympathetic attitude and one that associates achievement statistics to lecturers' ability could be accused of encouraging or forcing lecturers to produce high levels of success and achievement with little regard for how the results were obtained. It also suggests that lecturers could feel stifled and alone in their struggle with no real ability to communicate their professional concerns for fear of reprisal or being viewed as incompetent. This concept did not appear to be due to personal managerial approaches but more so a forced aspect of the marketised economy and perhaps one they themselves were not truly comfortable perpetuating. Of course some research suggests institutions have benefitted from market forces as it leaves no room for bad practice (Belfield and Levin 2002), which could be the case here, however it seems this financial insecurity has dominated working

practices rather than allowing professionals to improve as the impetus is taken away from teaching and learning (Ovens 2011).

An alternate perspective also materialised, which justified high expectations from a social justice ethos,

“Teachers always whinge about the students that just part of teaching but all students deserve to pass; sometimes it’s their last chance” (Manager 2).

Whilst this is an opinion of many educationalists in this context it seemed somewhat politically driven by the need to command high levels of success from the staff. This again leaves no room for discussions about ‘failing’ students without being seen as unsympathetic to students’ individual circumstances or their pedagogical approach.

Goffman (1959) becomes particularly relevant here, whereby the roles we have mean we must become ‘actors on a stage’ perpetuating values that are consistent and appropriate to the role rather than based on personal opinion. This has been discussed at length by Coffield (2008) historically, and surfaces again today, in an even more pressured environment. This frequently left the staff in a ‘living contradiction’ (Whitehead 1989) between professional values and those dictated by the organisation’s expectations, which are necessitated by funding policy. Although understandable when considered from the business perspective, it is not beneficial for the education of young people in Britain, nor, as a consequence, the UK’s workforce and wider economy.

An additional concern also arose, that of a general feeling of injustice for those students that did work hard, as their commitment and achievement is devalued by those who pass without the necessary knowledge, skills and/or application. Simultaneously the current system could be accused of facilitating and even encouraging negative student behaviours and inappropriate and unproductive learning cultures, an environment that in turn may be accused of creating a weak learning culture whereby students expect to be guided to pass or ‘spoon -fed’ (Cunnane 2011; Hubbard 2002). Possibly, in certain cases, not only

encouraging institutions but also the students themselves to 'game' the system. This was reflected throughout multiple interviews but is summarised well here;

“Yes some have issues, and as a teacher and tutor I always support students in this way, hence my huge workload.... I am always having informal tutorials in MY OWN TIME (raised voice) to try and ensure students have the support they need to pass, but some with big issues never let them affect their work and submit a good standard of work on time, whilst others who don't appear to have any major issues seem to play on any small issues they have knowing that they can use it as an excuse.”

(Lecturer 2).

This point articulates the paradigm shift in the expectations students have from education and their personal responsibilities within it. Students have been given a voice, and rightly so, but this voice is often mis-used in the complex and confused education system that prioritises student opinion over integral value directly as a result of the funding attached to each individual's success. Of course students should be heard and concerns should be dealt with via appropriate avenues, but this should not dictate practices and guide decisions to the extent they appear to.

Multiple extracts above evidence the amount that professionals routinely have to go 'above and beyond' reasonable expectations of the job to ensure all students 'get through' which further strengthens the claims of the likes of Hodkinson et al. (2005), James and Diment (2003) and Jephcote *et al.* (2008). In this sense lecturers felt hardened by the culture as an enormous amount of 'underground work' goes unnoticed, as only students' achievement that can be statistically measured are important in such a marketised environment. Professionals within education have always worked extra hours to plan effective and inspirational sessions and mark work efficiently, but these interview extracts clearly show that this additional work has now become 'a must' to ensure all students achieve. The *type* of additional work has

also shifted somewhat, meaning it is less about session planning and more about supportive systems and 'mopping-up' students that have lagged behind. This is because some students are becoming decreasingly pro-active in their learning in taught sessions, relying instead on feedback and support to achieve their qualifications, in turn placing the emphasis and workload onto the staff rather than themselves. As Torrance (2007) suggests pedagogy has 'shifted' to accommodate requirements of funding pressures. Wallace (2002) goes even further questioning the degree to which these pedagogical principles can be implemented under the current funding regime, suggesting the principles taught on FE teacher training programmes are more fantastical than realistic, due to the highly pressured and managerialised climate lecturers now enter into.

"Some students know they can do nothing and still pass at the last minute" (Lecturer 5)

"Students who never submit work or re-submit poor work repeatedly just means more work for me in terms of managing them. I have to do more planning cause they are behind, more marking because their work is too poor to pass and they can't fail, I have to give loads of tutorial support and follow the disciplinary procedure meaning more 1:1 meetings but I know, and the student knows that after the six week cut off they won't be kicked off the course unless they do something drastic like attack another student" (Lecturer 4).

A final point worthy of analysis was that younger participants appeared more shocked with the dominance of market forces on their working lives whilst experienced lecturers were more accustomed or hardened to this atmosphere. There was also a correlation between experienced lecturers and their unwillingness to perpetuate practices that went against their own values, with greater experience equating to higher levels of resilience and an ability to stay true to their *personal* values, rather than those dictated to them by their working environment. Furthermore there appeared to be an interesting contradiction for less experienced members of staff, (i.e. more shocked but more likely to conform to practices that

create Whitehead's (1989) 'living contradiction') means they are the group that experience the lowest level of job satisfaction, a worrying trend when new talent is an important driving force in educational attainment and wider economic prosperity.

These factors demonstrate clearly that there is a definite inclination for lecturers to show high levels of success that do not necessarily offer a true reflection of student ability, in turn devaluing the grading system. This approach both masks the low levels of some students' ability or effort and fails to reflect the high standards of work some students achieve (as nearly everyone achieves it), an issue often neglected in research. Not only does it oppose the policy intention of raising standards (Johnson 2006) it becomes particularly concerning when considering the future skills of the country, as students are leaving with qualifications without the related skills to justify them. A public crisis of confidence in vocational qualifications would potentially have devastating consequences for the individuals who possess them but also for the vocational area as a whole (a major criticism of the 2011 Wolf Report), emphasising the need for a long-term funding strategy that is not vulnerable to changing political philosophies (Hodgson and Spours 2008) and that poses no threats to professional integrity.

Conclusions

Our interpretation of the interview data validates many of the research findings previously presented within the field (Coffield 2007; 2008; Crabtree 2010), whilst providing a detailed contemporary understanding of the interplay between ground level staff, the managerial concerns and the macro level FE funding policies themselves.

It is clear from our findings that accountability does not particularly raise standards in education as intended through the funding initiatives, but rather erodes standards by refocusing educators' priorities around income and job in/securities instead of focusing on

student ability and attainment. The associated pressures to secure finances not only encourage colleges and their staff to 'game' the system but this simultaneously places staff in unnecessarily high levels of stress relating to the inherent daily conflict and pressures they face, and perpetuates a student understanding that achievements can be made with little effort if desired. All of this creates an unrepresentative and unsustainable system which appears to be successful (Ball 2003) when in reality could be accused of failing our young people, the economy and wider society as a whole.

As Frank Coffield (2008) challenged us to nearly a decade ago, let us 'just suppose' that teaching and learning really did become the first priority, and that it was re-centred as the strategic mechanism to ensure high standards were maintained rather than market forces dictating working practices. Coffield's challenge to the sector is probably even more relevant today, a decade or so since he made it, as marketisation has come to dominate working practices and colleges struggle to survive. The integrity of the profession has been demolished, perhaps unintentionally, leaving external control measures viewed as the only valid method of monitoring working practices and maintaining standards, an issue that has been demonstrated to be ineffective by this research.

Although only a small case study this paper helps develop research in the FE sector which is lacking substantive research (Clow 2005). It also helps enlighten experiences and perspectives of staff operating in a confused and politically saturated sector, an aspect that makes it extremely difficult to gain insight into (Panchamia 2013).

Of course FE is not the first experience that students have of education. They have usually already completed primary, secondary and possibly early years schooling if in mainstream education. With this in mind any changes made need to be aimed at the entire school system starting in the earliest phase, as students have already formed a disposition towards education and developed a strong learner identity by 16, affecting the way they learn, their expectations and their implicit view of education. This is already a frustration of HE provision

(Collini, 2011)) and now it appears FE suffers the same concerns as students arrive having experienced education as a system of passing exams rather than holistically learning of the subject, meaning educators in HE must work within this paradigm despite obvious concerns regarding its value.

It is the economic climate that has affected schooling in this way, reshaping how education is viewed by questioning its true value. Policy shifts have been justified on this basis, however as marketisation produces ever widening gaps between economic prosperity of various groups whilst simultaneously offering ever higher pay scales for those in the top ranking positions in the education sector (Kay, 2014) this justification becomes questionable.

If finances were allocated generically depending on the number of courses a college runs and the resources required to teach them, professionals would have the scope to return to teaching subjects and giving accurate and fair feedback to students without the current extensive financial pressure to ensure their achievement. This is a controversial suggestion, due to the consensus amongst policy makers, if not commentators, that a marketised education economy is the only viable method to provide the nation with a responsive and efficient FE market (Chitty 2004). However, it may be the only way of ensuring that lecturers' working lives are not dominated by the fiscal pressure which have been clearly shown here to adversely affect professionals and oppose the government's policy aim of improving standards to meet the demands of individuals, society and the wider economy alike; Let us indeed 'just suppose...'.

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