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Further Education, Political Economy and Social Change

Robin Simmons

Ph.D. on the Basis of Published Work

University of Huddersfield

July 2009

Further Education, Political Economy and Social Change

Robin Simmons

Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy on
the Basis of Published Work

University of Huddersfield

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Abstract

This submission contains eight papers and a synoptic commentary to be examined for the award of *PhD on the Basis of Published Work*. The papers focus upon the further education (FE) system in England. Each examines significant contemporary or historical issues and provides a critical analysis of the changing nature of FE. Collectively, the publications constitute an original and significant contribution to understanding further education and the social and economic context within which it is placed. The commentary highlights the links between the different papers and demonstrates their coherence; it locates the publications within an overarching analytical framework; and it shows how the work submitted makes a significant contribution to knowledge. It also explains my contribution to the three co-authored papers that constitute part of this thesis. It is argued that, taken together, my work provides a sustained and consistent critique of the English further education system from a critical materialist perspective.

Further education, political economy and social change

Robin Simmons

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This commentary reviews and analyses eight papers submitted for the award of *PhD on the Basis of Published Work*. The papers focus upon the further education (FE) system in England. Each examines significant contemporary or historical issues and provides a critical analysis of the changing nature of FE. Collectively, the publications constitute an original and significant contribution to understanding further education and the social and economic context within which it is placed.

This commentary highlights the links between the different papers and demonstrates their coherence; it locates the publications within an overarching analytical framework; and it shows how the work submitted makes a significant contribution to knowledge. It also explains my contribution to the three co-authored papers that constitute part of this submission. It is argued that, taken together, my work provides a sustained and consistent critique of the English further education system from a critical materialist perspective.

Introduction

This submission for the award of *PhD on the Basis of Published Work* consists of eight papers drawn from international peer reviewed journals. Each paper focuses on the further education (FE) system in England and deals with issues of contemporary or historical importance. Individually, the papers analyse different facets of the changing nature of FE but, collectively, they constitute a significant contribution to understanding the English FE system and the social and political context in which it is placed. The purpose of this commentary is to locate the publications within an analytical framework, and to show how my work makes a significant contribution to knowledge. It will highlight the links between the different publications and demonstrate the coherence of my work as a sustained critique and analysis of further education in England. It will also explain my contribution to the three co-authored papers in this submission.

The publications submitted are as follows:

- Simmons, R. (2008a) Gender, work and identity: a case study from the English further education sector, *Research in Post-compulsory Education*, 13 (3), 267-279 [Gender, work and identity]
- Simmons, R. (2008b) Golden years? Further education colleges under local authority control, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 32 (4), 359-371 [Golden years?]
- Simmons, R. (2008c) Raising the age of compulsory education in England: A NEET solution? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 56 (4), 420-439 [NEET solution?]
- Simmons, R. (2009a) Entry to employment: discourses of inclusion and employability in work-based learning for young people, *Journal of Education and Work*, 22 (2), 137-151 [Entry to employment]
- Simmons, R. (2009b) Further education in England and the lost opportunity of the Macfarlane Report, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 33 (2), 159-169 [Macfarlane]
- Simmons, R. and Thompson, R. (2007a) Aiming higher: how will universities respond to changes in initial teacher training for the post-compulsory sector? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 31 (2), 171-182 [Aiming higher]
- Simmons, R. and Thompson, R. (2007b) Teacher educators in post-compulsory education: gender, discourse and power, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 59 (4), 517-533 [Teacher educators]
- Simmons, R. and Thompson, R. (2008) Creativity and performativity: the case of further education, *British Educational Research Journal*, 34 (5), 601-618 [Creativity and performativity]

NB. A shortened version of the title of each paper is included in brackets at the end of the reference. Hereafter, the papers will be referred to using these shortened titles.

On one level there are clear links between each paper submitted. Common themes can be identified and there is a significant degree of continuity between the papers. Indeed, it is possible to trace the connections between each publication in a relatively straightforward, linear fashion. The first, *Aiming higher*, reviews and problematises the changing nature of FE teacher training and locates the recent changes in this provision within their social, political and economic context. There are clear links between this and the second paper, *Teacher educators*, which also focuses upon FE teacher training, albeit a different facet of this subject -

the significant degree of feminisation that has come to characterise the teacher educator workforce. Connections can, in turn, be made between *Teacher educators* and the paper *Gender, work and identity*, a publication which analyses the increasing feminisation of FE more generally using a similar approach to that of the earlier paper.

There is a large degree of continuity between the publications above and the others in this submission. For example, the removal of further education from local authority control is discussed in the three papers above and is revisited, in some detail, in two papers that deal with the history of FE: *Golden years?* and *Macfarlane*. Indeed, to understand the particular role reserved for further education within the political economy it is necessary to understand the history of FE, its traditional connections to industry and commerce, and its place within the institutional landscape of English education more generally. However, in order to fully appreciate the coherence of the publications in this submission they need to be seen as part of a larger picture; each paper is essentially part of a broader analysis of further education. Taken together, the papers in this submission constitute a sustained critique of the English FE system and the political economy in which it operates. Effectively, this constitutes a thesis that relates the changing nature of further education to wider social, political and ideological change. Collectively, the papers show that, over recent years, FE has been redirected and re-shaped in many ways. However, there is a common theme that runs throughout the publications: the increasing level of state intervention which aims to tie further education ever more closely to the perceived needs of the economy.

There are two separate but related developments that have been largely responsible for the changing nature of FE – globalisation and neo-liberalism. An examination of these forces alongside dominant discourses of the ‘knowledge economy’ is central to understanding FE’s current position – whether this relates to the changing nature of its teacher training; the ‘creativity’ agenda; issues of skill, knowledge and the curriculum; or the fate of tertiary colleges. This is pivotal to my work and the particular themes explored in each paper can, in some ways, be regarded as deriving largely from the inter-play of these factors. Increasingly, further education has been placed at the nexus of assertions about skill, globalisation and the demands of the knowledge economy. This has led Coffield (2006) to describe FE as a sector that is now dominated by diktat and discipline, performativity and managerialism. Nevertheless, my work acknowledges that the series of reforms to which FE has been subjected since the 1980s have not all had negative consequences. It is recognised that further education is, in many ways, more open and inclusive than before. Some of the changes that have taken place have improved access for previously excluded groups; FE colleges tend to be more outward looking and responsive to their communities; and many staff are highly committed to their students. However, my work argues that these improvements and strengths need to be set against the wide range of weaknesses and deep-seated problems that are now endemic in further education (Coffield, 2006 p. 5).

The first section of this commentary details my contribution to the three jointly authored papers. For each of the three articles *Aiming higher*; *Teacher educators*; and *Creativity and performativity* the contribution made by each author is explained. Links between the division of labour in these three papers and later work carried out on other publications are also highlighted. The next two sections develop the two key themes of globalisation and neo-liberalism. They provide an overview of these phenomena, consider their relationship to each other, and discuss the consequences of this particular symbiosis. The following section focuses on discourses of the 'knowledge economy', which, it is argued, are essentially a neo-liberal response to the perceived pressures of globalisation. The particular place reserved for further education within this context is highlighted.

After discussing and critiquing the ideas outlined above the commentary goes on to develop the analytical framework within which the publications sit. This, it is explained, is largely influenced by neo-Marxism, but is also influenced by other critical perspectives. It is argued that it is possible to synthesise different views of social and educational change and that the framework which is applied provides a coherent and critical analysis of FE. This I describe as a critical materialist perspective. I conclude by drawing together the key themes contained within the publications and by summarising the original contribution to knowledge made. This relates to the analysis of contemporary policy, the history of further education, an understanding of the gendered nature of work in FE colleges, and the application of a range of existing ideas and concepts to new contexts.

The three co-authored papers

There was collaboration between the two authors on most sections in the first published paper, *Aiming higher*. This is perhaps unsurprising as *Aiming higher* was written partly as a critique of changes being imposed by the state that impacted upon both our working lives. It places these changes within a discourse that is continuous with a range of other reforms of the FE system that suffer from similar tensions and contradictions. Thus, although *Aiming higher* provides a critical insight into a particular set of reforms, it has at least as much value as a critique of the state's approach towards further education more broadly. Therefore, it can be seen as setting the tone and as paving the way for my later work. Although in *Aiming higher* there was some overlap in the division of labour, it is nevertheless possible to identify the main themes developed by each of us. I was chiefly responsible for the socio-political context and the overall historical perspective within which the paper sits, whilst much of the argument about the curricular reforms taking place in FE teacher education was produced by Thompson. The development of these interests can be seen in our later work. Indeed, another aspect of FE teacher education formed the basis for our next collaboration, *Teacher educators*. However, my concern with political issues and the connections between FE and broader social change are themes that can be seen running through all the papers. Furthermore, as is indicated above, two of my later articles deal specifically with the history of further education.

Thompson's particular interest in the teacher education curriculum was later developed in the paper *Changing step or marking time? Teacher education reform for the learning and skills sector in England* (Thompson and Robinson, 2008).

My focus on policy is evident in the paper *Teacher educators*, where I provided much of the content about the changing nature of further education in the sections *Gender patterns in FE; A 'new order'?*; and *A new 'new order'?* I also provided a significant part of the section *Interpreting the feminisation of FE teacher training*. Here I contributed much of the evidence from UK studies about gender in FE; Thompson provided much of the international perspective. I later adopted the theoretical perspective used in this paper to develop my work on gender and FE. A certain continuity in approach between *Teacher educators* and my *Gender, work and identity* paper can be seen. In the latter, my own empirical findings and the analysis of a range of other data are placed within a similar analytical framework to produce a case study providing critical insight into the increasing feminisation of FE more generally.

In the final co-authored publication, *Creativity and performativity*, it is possible to identify the contribution of each author by section. Thompson provided much of the discussion of creativity and recent developments around the creativity agenda in education generally. I focused on providing the historical and policy context for the paper and on developing an analysis of the creativity agenda as applied to FE in particular. This can be seen in the sections *Operationalising creativity in further education* and *The FE curriculum*. There was collaboration on New Labour's approach to further education, as well as on the introductory and concluding sections of the paper. My interest in the FE curriculum and matters of knowledge and skill is developed considerably in the two papers *NEET solution?* and *Entry to employment*.

Globalisation and the political economy

This section initially sketches some of the key components of globalisation; it then highlights how the pressures of globalisation have been interpreted by governments in different nation states; finally, it draws attention to neo-liberal responses to globalisation, particularly in the UK. It will be followed by a section that focuses on neo-liberalism in more detail. This will outline some of its main assumptions and show how UK governments have used a particular approach to the implementation of neo-liberal policies – an approach that has had far-reaching consequences for UK society in general, and the public sector in particular. Some of the effects of neo-liberal reform upon further education will be discussed and used to illustrate the impact of these policies more broadly.

Although there is no agreed definition of globalisation, it is nevertheless possible to identify certain key principles which, most would agree, broadly constitute this phenomenon. Thus, whilst it should be recognised that globalisation is a contested concept, it can still be used as a heuristic tool to help understand and explain social change (Lauder et al. 2006, pp 30-31). One

key component of most understandings of globalisation is the idea that the world is becoming increasingly 'inter-connected' and traditional divisions between nation states are breaking down. This, it is often said, encompasses a growing degree of economic, cultural and political 'connectivity' and is accompanied by an increased flow and inter-change of goods, services, people and ideas across the world. Arguably, there is a concomitant decline in the importance of geographical and national boundaries and an increasing inter-dependence between countries and people. Knowledge, information and finance are able to flow across the world quickly and efficiently via global communication networks. Time and space are said to be 'compressed', especially by the use of information technology and fast, relatively inexpensive forms of travel (Lauder et al., 2006, p. 31).

There are various ways of interpreting globalisation but some radical globalists advocate a future where national governments cease to maintain their primacy. Such an understanding of globalisation tends to view traditional bureaucratic state structures as incompatible with the demands of the new global order. In order to deal with the emergent needs of a globalised economy decision-making, it is argued, will increasingly need to be located in regional and global agencies; local cultures, it is claimed, will become more and more homogenised (Reich, 1991; Waters, 1995). From this perspective globalisation is leading to nothing short of political, economic and cultural transformation (Held and McGrew, 2000).

In the UK, various assumptions about the potency of globalisation have had a significant influence upon social and economic policy in general, and education policy in particular (see, for example, Cabinet Office, 2008; Leitch, 2006). However, caution needs to be exercised when assessing the impact of globalisation. Although it can be associated with certain quantitative and qualitative breaks from the past, it is doubtful whether globalisation can be regarded as an entirely new phenomenon. Furthermore, whilst it is possible to identify some objective changes associated with globalisation there are also subjective dimensions which are often promoted as objective processes. There are normative assumptions which underpin official conceptions of globalisation which emphasise its pervasiveness, and treat its forces as beyond political debate (Rizvi and Lingard, 2006 p. 251). Globalisation, it is suggested, cannot be divorced from the political and economic decisions that shape society and its institutions (Lauder et al. 2006 p. 31). Bourdieu (2003) writes about a conflation between the descriptive usage of globalisation and a performative interpretation of the term. For him, such a process constitutes a justification for the spread of neo-liberal economics across the world. Indeed, it can be argued that dominant interpretations of globalisation often conflate the term with neo-liberalism. From this position it is possible to see globalisation as a doxa or as a discursive system pursued at policy level by powerful states and international capital.

Despite assertions about its inevitability and irresistibility, globalisation does not necessarily dictate any one form of political response. Capitalism can take various forms and there have been significant differences in the responses of different nation states: neo-liberalism is not an

unavoidable response to globalisation. Whilst the UK and many other Anglophone nations have chosen to embrace globalisation through the adoption of economic neo-liberalism, others have actively resisted many aspects of the Anglo-Saxon model. The Nordic nations, for example, have chosen to mediate the effects of globalisation through encouraging greater continuity in employment and welfare than has been the case in either the UK or the USA (Lauder et al., 2006 p. 46-7). Nation states are able to shape trans-national systems at least as much as they, in turn, are disciplined by global forces. Markets need to be created, maintained and policed. Rather than accepting globalisation as a 'natural' process it needs to be recognised that, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, globalisation is dominated by a neo-liberal orthodoxy of the 'free-market'. Thus, its impact has been felt unevenly – both between and within different nation states.

Whilst major changes are related to contemporary forms of globalisation, it needs to be recognised that global and national domains of power and culture are not necessarily mutually exclusive. State power has never existed independently of international context; trans-national trade and significant levels of migration have existed for centuries. Furthermore, whilst over the past thirty years nation states have clearly been affected by globalisation to a far greater extent than beforehand we still have 'a world of states'. The role of the individual nation state may be changing but this does not necessarily mean it is diminishing or will disappear altogether at some point in the future (Hirst, 2000 p. 178-183). The supposedly irresistible forces of globalisation have nevertheless provided a backdrop for the restructuring of workplace relations across both the private and public sectors in much of the 'developed' world. However, in the UK in particular, certain understandings of globalisation have led to profound changes in the way public services are managed, organised and delivered. The unprecedented level of pressure placed upon the English further education system since the 1980s can be seen as one of the clearest examples of this. In England, policy-makers imbued with an ideology of the market, have increasingly come to see FE as the answer to perceived skill shortages and as the solution to questions of economic competitiveness and social inclusion. Further education, due perhaps to a combination of its peculiar history and its ongoing institutional weakness has, more than any other sector of education, proved to be particularly vulnerable to such interventions.

One way of explaining this situation is through using Bourdieu's (1986) concept of 'field'. According to Bourdieu a society is made up of many 'fields' which are relatively autonomous but are structured by power relations. In the field of education it can be argued that it is largely the degree of 'academic capital' that determines who are the power-holders. Bourdieu (1988) argues that the weaker the academic capital the more vulnerable an institution or set of institutions are to state intervention, consumerism, marketisation and other forms of political pressure. These forces can be seen as leading to a shift in the underlying logic shaping academic practices: education becomes reconceptualised as a commercial transaction; the pedagogic relationship becomes dependent on the market transaction of the commodity; the

teacher becomes the 'producer' and the student the 'customer' (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2006 pp. 877-876). Much of the 'reform' of FE can be seen as deriving from neo-liberal policy solutions to the purported pressures of globalisation.

For a variety of reasons, further education has often been referred to as the 'Cinderella' service. Lacking the political sensitivity of schools or the prestige of universities, FE has traditionally been a relatively low-profile part of the education system in England. For most of its history it has suffered from significant under-funding and, until recently, FE received little attention from policy-makers or central government. However, this position has changed greatly over recent years and FE, with its traditional connections to work and the economy, has been particularly vulnerable to the pressures placed upon it by the state (Ainley, 2007).

Neo-liberalism, the state and public sector reform

Over the past thirty years economic neo-liberalism has enjoyed a position of dominance among governments and policy-makers throughout much of the world, but this has been especially the case in the Anglophone nations. The conceptualisation of neo-liberalism is often associated with the writing of Hayek (1976) and Friedman (Friedman and Friedman, 1980) but its intellectual roots can be traced back much further: some of its central tenets stem from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the principles of classical liberal philosophy. Certain key neo-liberal ideas such as a belief in competitive individualism and the maximisation of the market can be seen as contemporary interpretations of the philosophies of Hume, Smith, Ricardo and other classical liberals. It can also be argued that some of neo-liberalism's basic assumptions can be linked to notions of evolution and natural selection and their application to socio-economic questions (Olssen et al. 2004 p. 136).

Elements of social Darwinism can be seen in recent approaches to FE policy. For example, after further education was removed from local authority control in the early-1990s, principals were re-cast as 'chief executives' and colleges were required to compete against each other, schools, universities and other education and training providers in quasi-market conditions engineered and maintained by the state. In the five years after colleges left LEA control twenty thousand staff left FE as funding cuts, redundancies and restructuring swept across the sector (Burchill, 1998). FE colleges became far more taxing places in which to work, particularly for teachers: workloads increased greatly; pay and conditions deteriorated; and levels of professional autonomy were significantly curtailed (see, for example, Ainley and Bailey, 2007; Avis and Bathmaker, 2004; and Randle and Brady, 1997). Encouraged by the state, there was a trend towards 'macho-management' in many colleges; strike action and industrial unrest became commonplace. Such issues are highlighted in *Golden years?*

Although New Labour has been less overtly aggressive in its stance towards further education, many of the competitive forces that accompanied incorporation have nevertheless

been retained and, in some ways, intensified. In fact, the current Government has actively promoted competition in the further education system through encouraging private companies into the FE 'marketplace' (Allen and Ainley, 2007 p.7; UCU, 2007). As Hodgson and Spours (2006) argue, despite some differences in style and emphasis, there is a great deal of continuity between New Labour and their Conservative predecessors. The governments of Blair and Brown have remained committed to neo-liberalism - albeit accompanied by a discourse of social inclusion. However, within this *zeitgeist*, the interests of labour and capital are conflated in an unproblematic fashion; any tensions in this relationship are overlooked (Avis, 2007). This can perhaps be seen as part of what Hall (2005) calls New Labour's 'double shuffle'. Despite rhetoric of social democracy, issues of social justice are placed as subservient to neo-liberal understandings of the economy. Traditional forms of public sector organisation and delivery have continued to be dismantled. Institutional isomorphism, whereby public service organisations are required to behave like commercial enterprises, has been encouraged. The language of business and the market continue to be pervasive.

The Government has recently announced plans to reintroduce local authorities to further education (DCSF, 2009). However, local authorities will only be involved with provision for young people up to the age of 19. They will not be involved in FE and skills training for adults. Furthermore, there is no intention to rescind the corporate status of individual institutions. The leadership of colleges will remain with principals and governing bodies for the foreseeable future. Whilst there may be some potential to develop more democratic forms of engagement through these changes they remain set on the terrain of performativity and new public sector management. As such local authorities will be highly regulated by policies and targets laid down by the central state (Avis, 2009).

Neo-liberalism has a number of basic assumptions about both the nature of people and the role of state. It assumes, as a starting point, that there are natural and innate differences between individuals: for example, in terms of intelligence, motivation and moral character. Furthermore, neo-liberalism assumes that people are, at root, self-interested. It is argued that individuals function best and are able to contribute most effectively - both to their own welfare and to the economy in general - when they are allowed to follow their private interests. As it is believed that hierarchies based upon ability will naturally emerge, attempts to organise society in order to actively promote equality are assumed to be flawed. Rather than providing comprehensive benefits and welfare services it is proposed that the disadvantaged should be encouraged to 'stand on their own two feet'. Individual competition based upon opening up access to markets for education, training and work should, neo-liberals argue, be encouraged (Lauder et al., 2006 p. 25). Although full employment can no longer be guaranteed, under neo-liberalism, the state offers the opportunity for individuals to become 'employable'. Education and training are prioritised as the best way of overcoming the uncertainties of the labour market (Brown et al., 2001). Such notions, and the tensions and contradictions inherent within them, are explored in my *Entry to employment* paper. They can be seen as part of New

Labour's shift away from a distributive approach towards welfare to one that is based upon 'inclusion' and 'employability' as ways of attempting to increase social justice.

Despite there being a notable degree of continuity between classical liberalism and neo-liberalism there are also new emphases in neo-liberalism that represent a significant break from the ideals and principles of its predecessor. For example, although a degree of state intervention was always necessary, it is often argued that the aim of classical liberalism was to minimise the role of government and to 'free' people from bureaucratic constraints; supposedly, the ideal was for state intervention to be limited to ensuring that individuals did not infringe upon the rights of others. In contrast, under neo-liberalism, there is a positive conception of the state. Government, its institutions and the law are used far more proactively to create competition and to drive the market in all areas of social life. State intervention is seen as necessary to promote enterprising and competitive behaviour and to deal with restrictive, anti-competitive forces. Among other things, this shift involves a change in conception of the individual from *homo economicus*, who naturally behaves out of self-interest, to *manipulable man*, who is created by the state and who is encouraged to be perpetually 'responsive' (Olssen et al. 2004 p. 136-137). Such notions can be linked to Bernstein's concept of 'trainability' and many of the policy initiatives aimed at the 'socially excluded' which are discussed in the *Entry to employment* paper.

Although neo-liberalism has come to dominate economic and social policy across the western world, the UK and the USA have adopted many of its precepts with particular vigour. There have been far-reaching policies of deregulation and liberalisation and the introduction of privatisation and marketisation to the public sector. Hirst (2000 p. 179) argues that dominant interpretations of globalisation have, in fact, been promoted and configured through a series purposefully engineered political acts. The particular form of neo-liberalism adopted in the UK can be compared to the approach of the *Ordoliberalen* or 'Freiburg School' of neo-liberalism that developed in Germany in the late 1920s. This approach recognises that the market economy is not a natural or self-regulating entity but that it needs to be constituted, regulated and maintained by the state – especially through the use of legislation. The goal is to increase levels of competition throughout society so that social and work relations operate according to the principles of supply and demand. It is acknowledged that market forces are not natural or inevitable, and it is recognised that there is a need to actively construct the moral and cultural order of the market (Olssen et al. 2004 p. 167-168). From the late 1970s onwards, UK governments have adopted increasingly interventionist policies both to prevent anti-competitive practices and to actively promote competition – especially in areas such as education where market mechanisms are least prone to operate. The reform of the English further education system since the 1980s is perhaps one of the clearest examples of this agenda and forms a significant part of the backdrop against which the publications in this submission are set.

Some similarities can be seen between the approach of the *Ordoliberalen* and that of contemporary UK governments. For example, the *Education Reform Act* (1988), the *Further and Higher Education Act* (1992) and the *Learning and Skills Act* (2000) have all been used to impose or re-impose the discipline of the market upon further education. However, the logic of the Freiburg School can perhaps be seen most clearly in New Labour's persistent interventions in and tinkering with the FE system. This has included an almost bewildering range of strategies, initiatives and targets which aim to make FE providers responsive to the market and the disciplines of competition – the unprecedented level of which has been described as a 'torrent' of policy (Coffield, 2006 p. 5). The growing degree of direction and control which government now seeks to exercise over FE teacher training, explained in *Aiming higher*, could perhaps be seen as an example of the Freiberg approach in action.

Further education and the knowledge economy

For the present Government, assumptions about a direct causal relationship between levels of education, skill and economic success appear to have achieved an almost hegemonic status. It is argued that, as a result of globalisation, the UK is now facing new and unique challenges and that radical social and economic changes are necessary if a future of national stagnation and decline is to be avoided (Cabinet Office, 2008 foreword). For New Labour, all social institutions - but particularly education systems - must conform to the demands of globalisation. Contemporary policy attempts to tie all forms of education, but especially further education, to a certain view of economic competitiveness shaped by dominant interpretations of globalisation, 'skill' and the 'knowledge economy'.

Despite different responses to globalisation, one common theme - particularly for developed nations - has been a growing emphasis upon the importance of the knowledge economy. Within this discourse it is asserted that there is a rising international demand not only for traditional goods and services but also, increasingly, for high value, 'knowledge-based' products and services. It is widely held that, for developed nations, 'human capital' – the skills, knowledge and creativity of the workforce – will in future be the most important form of capital. Some, such as Becker (2006), would go so far as to argue that advanced nations, such as the USA and the UK, are becoming 'human capital' or 'knowledge capital' economies rather than simply capitalist economies. Physical and financial capital is deemed to be subservient to the skills, abilities and aptitudes of labour.

Whilst it is assumed that low-skill and raw material-intensive production will increasingly be located in poorer nations it is thought that, for the West, the future will prioritise brains over brawn. Technology is viewed as the vehicle through which to achieve prosperity but human capital is seen as the fuel which will enable it to run (Becker, 2006 p. 292). However, increasingly, trans-national companies attempt to construct a high-value, low-cost model in their attempt to compete for market share. As advances in information technology and

narrowing differences in productivity enable more professional and technical work to be carried out in low-wage economies, it is likely that cost pressures will intensify upon the workforce in Western Europe and North America. (Brown et al, 2008).

My work rejects popular characterisations of the knowledge economy for two main reasons. One is that such a discourse does not accurately reflect the nature of most forms of work and employment in the UK in general - and England in particular (Brown et al., 2001). The other is that such a label attempts to obscure the realities of capitalist relations. Nevertheless, it is recognised that such an understanding of the economy and society has certain implications for education. Indeed, following this logic, there is a need to reformulate and realign the purposes and governance of education systems in order to meet the demands of a labour market which will in future be based around high-skill labour processes. In the UK, it is commonly argued by politicians and policy-makers that if education systems can produce the desired number and mix of skilled workers, individuals, businesses and the nation as a whole will be able to benefit from the new global division of labour. At the same time, however, it is also fashionable to criticise education as failing to deliver the skilled workforce deemed necessary for the knowledge economy. This situation, it is claimed - unless reversed - will lead to failure in the global marketplace which will, in turn, lead to social and economic doom. Such arguments are highlighted in a number of my publications but are particularly evident in *NEET solution?* It is argued that such claims have now become pervasive to the extent that they now shape the education policy of New Labour governments almost entirely. Such assertions are commonplace in policy documents but are perhaps articulated most clearly in the Leitch Report of 2006. This report is aimed particularly at the English FE sector but, it can be argued, has become emblematic of New Labour's education policy in general (Simmons, 2008c p. 422).

Our nation's skills are not world class and we run the risk that this will undermine the UK's long - term prosperity....without increased skills we would condemn ourselves to a lingering decline in competitiveness, diminishing economic growth and a bleaker future for all (Leitch, 2006 p. 1).

These and similar claims can be seen as a manifestation of dominant neo-liberal understandings of the knowledge economy and discourses of globalisation.

Following the logic of human capital theory, it is the responsibility of individuals to invest and re-invest in their own development on a repeated and on-going basis throughout their lives. However, drawing on work from researchers operating from a range of perspectives, my own writing highlights many of the contradictions inherent within such assumptions. A critique of this position forms a particularly important part of the *NEET solution?* and *Entry to employment* papers. Both these publications examine the participation of young people in education and

training against dominant discourses of high-skills and popular notions of 'employability'. Nevertheless, despite the lack of any convincing evidence about a direct relationship between education and economic success, claims about the demands of the knowledge economy have been used as one way of justifying the increasing commercialisation and marketisation of FE over the past two decades. Indeed, such a discourse was already clearly articulated in the White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES/ED, 1991) – a document which, like many others since, positioned FE as badly in need of reform, unresponsive and divorced from the 'real world' of business and which led, ultimately, to the removal of colleges from local authority control.

Both *NEET solution?* and *Entry to employment* highlight that low pay, low skill relations are still commonplace in the UK and that, arguably, they are of growing importance, particularly for the English economy. Furthermore, it is emphasised that de-industrialisation should not be confused or conflated with a claimed reduction in unskilled work. Although it is acknowledged in both *NEET solution?* and *Entry to employment* that pockets of so-called knowledge industries do exist, it is also emphasised that this is not typical of the UK economy in general where the majority of jobs are located in labour-intensive and predominantly localised parts of the service sector. Indeed, the whole idea of a knowledge economy would seem to be little more than wishful thinking (Brown et al., 2003 p. 114). Such a critique is evident throughout my publications; it can be seen in the first paper, *Aiming higher* and is a theme that can be traced through to the more recent work discussed here.

Drawing on historical evidence, my work highlights long-standing concerns about the competitiveness of the English economy and the perceived threat to national well-being represented by economic competition from overseas. Indeed, it is recognised that the supposed relationship between education and the economy has been a significant theme in the UK for at least 150 years (Simmons, 2008c p. 423-424). However, until the late twentieth century, such concerns were centred mainly upon the industrial muscle of Germany and other northern European nations. In contrast, there are new emphases contained within current policy discourses about economic competitiveness and globalisation. One of these is that, in addition to the UK's traditional rivals, such discourses now take place against the rise of China, India and other 'emerging economies'. Another new emphasis is the increasing stress placed upon such matters and assertions about the need for urgent responses to remedy this situation. Furthermore, within contemporary policy discourse, it is education that is now expected almost exclusively to provide the route to salvation. Other possible strategies are eschewed.

Extending a critique of what Avis (2007) calls the 'competitiveness settlement', the paper *Creativity and performativity* focuses on discourses of creativity in FE and further education's supposed role in developing the flexible, adaptable workers and consumers deemed necessary for social and economic progress in advanced capitalist societies. It critically

explores contemporary notions of creativity and problematises their relationship with the current situation in FE. Drawing on a range of empirical studies and policy analyses, it is argued that further education is increasingly positioned at the 'lower end' of a largely class-based division of post-compulsory education in England and that, in such a situation, meaningful creativity is difficult to achieve. It is argued that within the performative context of FE, attempts to interpret official discourse on creativity may only serve to reproduce and exacerbate existing inequalities in education.

Critical materialism: a framework for the analysis of further education

The fact that much of my work emphasises the combined pressures of globalisation, neo-liberalism and the knowledge economy shows the importance it places upon a structuralist approach to explaining social change. I am strongly influenced by Marxist thought and, to a significant degree, each of my papers is informed by this position. It is recognised that the state is not a neutral arbiter of different interests. Education is seen as a crucial component in promoting the interests of capital – both through the reproduction of privilege and in legitimising inequality through the promotion of dominant ideology (Althusser, 1972). The perpetuation of such a situation depends, to a large extent, upon the creation and sustenance of a moral climate – or hegemony – where inequality is seen as natural, legitimate and functional. Hence my work mobilises a number of key Marxian principles and concepts and recognises the significant role that capital plays in driving change in education and in society more broadly.

Certain influences are long established: some stem from my first degree, when I first became interested in connections between education, political economy and Marxist approaches to social change. The work of Poulantzas (1973) on the role of the state in securing and legitimising the conditions necessary for the accumulation of capital was an important reference point. This *weltanschauung* was reinforced when I began teaching in further education. Almost as soon as I started work in FE, colleges were removed from local authority control and re-cast in a competitive and marketised environment. Hitherto FE teachers had been shielded from an excessive exploitation of their labour (Simmons, 2008b p. 365-366). Later, as I studied for a masters degree alongside teaching in a FE college, I became interested in Braverman's (1974) work on the labour process and in applying his analysis to the work of FE teachers. More broadly, I found I could relate my experiences to many of those uncovered in Ainley and Bailey's (1997) *The Business of Learning: staff and student experiences of further education in the 1990s*. Randle and Brady's (1997) work on the diminishing circumstances of FE teachers seemed to encapsulate many of my thoughts at that time.

Following Gramsci (1973), I regard challenging dominant ideology to be a significant part of the role of the intellectual. As such, my work seeks to offer a critique of neo-liberalism and

much of the educational reform that has accompanied it over recent years. However, whilst I would argue that material forces largely shape the social world, I also acknowledge that change - in FE or elsewhere - is rarely linear or straightforward. Moreover, it is necessary to recognise that the influence of social class and the dominance of capital are mediated and refracted, at least to some extent, by gender and race and other forms of identity. People are not merely the puppets of materialism; they are able to exercise a degree of agency in their lives. As Apple and Whitty (2002 p. 72) argue, ordinary people are not simply 'crushed' by structural forces. They are actors, individually and collectively, historically and currently. Social class may remain the most significant predictor of life chances in Western society, but other forms of identity and individual circumstances also play some part in shaping social phenomena – an understanding which is reflected in my writing.

To be clear: my work does not desert material relations – it attempts to locate power dynamics within a framework that is shaped by broader social and economic conditions. But it does also engage with other structural analyses from outside the Marxian tradition, such as the work of Bernstein. It also supplements structural approaches with elements of post-structuralism. Consequently, my approach is a synthesis or amalgamation of critical perspectives. Whilst Marxist approaches provide the broad overview and the overarching framework within which my work sits, further explanatory power can be gained through applying other perspectives, particularly at micro and meso-levels. My approach could therefore perhaps best be described as a 'critical materialist' perspective to further education and social change.

Bernstein's work is used in the *Entry to employment* paper. Here some of his ideas on the curriculum and knowledge are utilised to analyse the relative value of different forms of education and training within a marketised economy. By exploring the different modes of knowledge contained within different curricula it is possible to see how, in a society characterised by class stratification, those from higher social classes are most likely to gain access to more prestigious modes of knowledge that prepare entrants for higher-status occupations and structured career opportunities in an increasingly polarised labour market. In contrast, provision based upon lower-level generic discourses and the construction of 'transferable' skills focus upon building 'trainability'. Largely, these equip those from lower socio-economic groups to be a supply of adaptable labour ready to submit to the hegemony of capital.

The use of Bernstein alongside a Marxist approach may disconcert some as his approach is more often associated with a Durkheimian analysis of society. However, whilst some characterise him as conservative, Pearce (1989) argued that Durkheim's work contains latent and manifest socialist elements that can help to produce critiques of capitalism. Moreover, Karabel and Halsey (1977 pp. 69-70) emphasise that, whilst it would be misleading to describe Bernstein as a Marxist, there is nevertheless a Marxist element in his analysis of educational

ideologies. This, they argue, exists in Bernstein's recognition of class conflict and the far-reaching consequences of structured inequality. Furthermore, Bernstein himself recognised that it is possible to use some of his work to complement a broadly Marxist approach (1977b p. 475). By using a Marxist analysis at the macro level, combined with a Bernsteinian approach to analysing knowledge and the curriculum, it is possible to examine how knowledge is packaged, rationed and distributed by practices in the classroom and the workplace. In this way a powerful neo-realist critique of the nature of the curriculum can be assembled. Bernstein's analysis of the curriculum can help to illustrate how class-based inequalities are experienced and reproduced in contemporary forms of education and training.

Issues of curriculum and its relationship to class and the economy are also discussed elsewhere in my work. In the *NEET solution?* paper the current confusion between skills and competencies is highlighted. Alongside rhetorical claims made about the need for creative, innovative workers to take their place in the knowledge economy, New Labour's FE policy has become shaped largely by the image of learning as the formal acquisition of economically useful skills. However, within this context, skills have become redefined as competencies. Rather than traditional conceptions of skill which emphasise a unity between knowledge and action, much contemporary discourse impoverishes the meaning of skill through defining it as a set of discrete performance-related tasks remote from knowledge (Ainley, 1999 pp. 92-93).

It is argued that, for most, future employment will be based in labour intensive, low-skilled work in the service sector. Therefore, high-level knowledge and skills rooted in the accumulation of in-depth knowledge accompanied by the acquisition of process-specific skills will not be necessary for the majority (Simmons 2008c, p. 435). In *Creativity and performativity* it is argued that the FE curriculum has, in general, been driven 'downwards' over recent years. Whilst high status courses and the creation of knowledge are located elsewhere, the FE curriculum can, in many ways, be seen to reflect the production of obedience and conformity in the 'lower orders' that is a significant tradition in English education (Lawton, 1975). Although, as Thompson (2009) highlights, the student intake of further education is more diverse than many assume, traditionally FE has been a predominantly working class endeavour - albeit normally reserved mainly for relatively privileged sections of that class. The elite have never had much need to engage with further education. In class-conscious England, the middle classes have always regarded FE as something best suited to 'other people's children' (Richardson, 2007 p. 411).

Post-structuralist perspectives are often thought of as a challenge to structural theories in that they shift away from what have been described as the 'meta-narratives' of modernity. There is a tendency to use a more fluid, multi-faceted approach to analysing 'difference' (Lauder et al., 2006 p. 13-14). It could be argued that it may be difficult to reconcile structuralist and post-structuralist approaches. However, it is important to recognise that there are numerous strands of post-structuralism – some of which can be combined more effectively with a neo-Marxist

approach than others. For example, post-structural analyses of social change that stress political and institutional aspects of power can arguably be reconciled with neo-Marxist conceptions of cultural hegemony. The discursive production of inequality constructed, for instance, through the state, the family and education can be used to 'flesh out' and supplement Marxian analyses.

Arguably, recent patterns of social change obscure, at least to some degree, the visibility of class relations in British society. For example, the decline of the UK's traditional manufacturing industries, the increasing numbers of women in paid work, and patterns of migration mean that social relations have become more complex since the mid-twentieth century. However, this does not mean that a class-based analysis should be abandoned (Avis, 2008). It is necessary to recognise that such social changes have taken place within a framework that is shaped by broader social and economic conditions (Anyon, 1991 p. 125). Social reproduction may not take place in the relatively uncomplicated way suggested by Bowles and Gintis (1976) but education is still heavily implicated in maintaining old class divisions and in creating new ones (Ainley, 1999 p. 134). My work emphasises that dominant discourses take place against a material base and whilst it is recognised that other forms of identity and difference do mediate the influence of structural forces, education – especially in England – is highly influenced by issues of social class (Hyland and Winch, 2007). Material conditions of work, income and wealth influence the formation of identity and constrain the level of agency individuals or groups are able to exercise.

Teacher educators accounts for the gendered division of labour in post-compulsory teacher education through a combination of critical structuralist and post-structuralist analyses. This approach also informs the paper *Gender, work and identity*, an article that builds on the work of *Teacher educators*. Using data from a case study and placing empirical findings within a critical framework, this article explores the significant numerical and cultural feminisation of FE more broadly and argues that this phenomenon can be best explained through understanding the previous 'outsider' position of women in combination with the powerful political and economic pressures placed on colleges over the past two decades. It is argued that, whilst structural trends deriving from changes in the labour market and government policy may have brought more women into FE, this has acted in synergy with the complexities of gender and women's constructed identities. The qualitative data unearthed in this research provide vivid illustrations of gendered discourses and show how, in addition to structural and economic forces, a range of professional, personal and familial circumstances have contributed to the feminisation of FE.

Both *Teacher educators* and *Gender, work and identity* emphasise that feminisation does not mean that gender equality has been achieved or that women have gained ascendancy in the workplace, or in society more broadly. It is recognised that feminisation often takes place under conditions of economic and political turbulence and that, arguably, a significant reason

for the feminisation of FE is the diminished circumstances that now characterise work in the sector. Feminisation has coincided with deteriorating pay and conditions and the rejection of further education as a career choice by men (Cole, 2000 p. 213; Deem et al. 2000 p. 233-234). Furthermore, the feminisation of FE that has taken place has mainly drawn in women from relatively privileged white, middle class backgrounds (Noel, 2006). The empirical research conducted for these two papers developed my understanding in various ways. It helped build a reflexive approach and an appreciation that change is not uni-dimensional. It also generated data that provided insights from men about the changing nature of FE. Whilst *Teacher educators* draws on research from feminist perspectives and uses work from both UK and international studies to help understand gender in the changing and pressured environment of FE, *Gender, work and identity* provides insights from the perspective of a particular group of men. This helps to fill a gap in the existing literature as well as developing a fuller understanding of the dynamics of gender relations as they are played out in the workplace.

The majority of data used in the papers were not generated from my own field work. Each paper draws on data from a variety of sources but three main avenues are used: findings from significant empirical research projects on FE; the analysis of contemporary policy texts; and the use of historical documents. The balance of evidence used in each paper depends upon its particular focus, but each tends to use a combination of sources. Historical documents are used extensively in the two publications which deal with FE's past: *Golden Years?* and *Macfarlane*. Both these papers draw upon a range of sources that deal with the history of FE. These include 'classic' texts such as Bristow (1970), Cantor and Roberts (1972) and Venables (1967), as well as those focusing on FE's more recent past like Cotterell and Heley (1981), Gleeson and Mardle (1980) and Terry (1987). Similar sources also form part of the evidence base for *NEET solution?*, a paper that draws comparisons between the current initiative to increase the age of compulsory participation in education and training and previous attempts to do so.

These publications also draw on official documents and other government records. As might be expected, research carried out for the *Macfarlane* paper required extensive use of the original text of the Macfarlane Report (1980). However, it was also necessary to use *Hansard* to uncover the mechanics of how Macfarlane's initial recommendation for a national system of tertiary colleges was rejected. Thus, this paper shows both how and why a key moment for FE was lost. Among other historical sources, *NEET solution?* uses material from W.E. Forster's introduction to the 1870 Elementary Education Act; the Crowther Report; and various other Ministry of Education publications from the 1940s and 1950s as part of its evidence base. *Golden years?* uses Audit Commission and Further Education Unit reports alongside trade union documentation and more recent reviews of the period to help piece together various strands of further education's past. *Aiming higher* and *Creativity and performativity* make use of a range of policy documents alongside arguments drawn from a range of other empirical and conceptual studies.

An interrogation of history can help uncover aspects of the past that have been forgotten or remain hidden from view (May, 2001 p. 177). Arguably, this is the case with each of the papers discussed above but it is perhaps most vivid in *Golden years?* Whilst this article does not seek to excuse any of the excesses that have characterised further education since incorporation, it does expose some of the problems that were commonplace in colleges in the past – especially in relation to the interests of women, ethnic minorities and others outside the white male ‘aristocracy of the working class’ that traditionally dominated FE. The often parochial, rather insular nature of the ‘old FE’ is unearthed in *Golden years?* – findings that are a little uncomfortable for a researcher critical of much of the recent ‘reform’ of further education. However, it would not be necessary to be a disciple of Hayek or Friedman to see some of the flaws that characterised traditional forms of local authority control.

Whilst it is recognised that the injection of market forces into the FE system may have helped to ‘flush out’ some of the undesirable practices of the past, it is important to note that this does not mean injustice has been eliminated. It may have been reconfigured, but it has not ceased. It can be argued that, in many ways, the use of market mechanisms actually helps to exacerbate inequality. As Ball (2003) highlights, middle-class parents and other privileged groups are often able to manipulate marketised systems according to their own interests. Ostensibly neutral processes of selection and allocation operate to reinforce existing social divisions and create new dimensions of inequality.

An extensive range of more contemporary evidence and data are also used in the papers submitted. These include findings from significant national research projects on FE such as those from the ESRC’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme, from Edward et al. (2007), Edward and Coffield (2007), and Fuller and Unwin (2008). Other empirical research, such as that of Avis et al (2001), Avis and Bathmaker (2004) and Noel (2006), is used to underpin some of the key arguments contained in the papers. However, a significant corpus of data is drawn from an analysis of contemporary policy documents. This is a consistent theme throughout the publications and includes the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) White Paper (2004) on FE teacher training in *Aiming higher*; the Further Education and Training Act (DfES, 2007) and the Education and Skills Bill (DCSF, 2007) in *NEET solution?*; and Learning and Skills Council, Learning and Skills Development Agency and DfES reports on work-based learning in the *Entry to employment* paper. The common thread which links my approach to policy analysis is a critical materialist reading of state produced educational policy texts. Although educational policy-making is often presented as a democratic, consensual process, my work emphasises the political nature of educational policy. Policy documents are subjected to a rigorous and critical content analysis in order to expose their political, economic and cultural meaning.

The concept of *discourse* is a powerful lens through which to analyse power relations and is employed at various points in my work as a way of critiquing the changing nature of FE. Discourses or 'serious speech acts' – both written and spoken – can be seen as embodying meaning and social relationships. Dominant discourses can construct certain possibilities for thought and can order and combine ideas in a particular way so as to exclude or displace other combinations (Ball, 1990 p. 2). Discourses authorise certain people to speak and correspondingly silence others - or at least make their voices less authoritative (Usher and Edwards, 1994 p. 90). For example, under neo-liberalism, official discourse has stressed the shortcomings of traditional bureaucratic forms of educational governance and management; it has emphasised the need for systemic reform and increased levels of control and direction over both the content and the delivery of the curriculum; and it has valorised the benefits of globalisation and the 'knowledge economy'. In FE, such discourses have become so pervasive that they could be argued to constitute a regime of truth – a climate legitimising what can and cannot be said and thought.

Although his concept of power was developed in opposition to Marxist ideas, for Foucault the discursive and the material were inextricably linked. Much of his work was concerned with the analysis of institutional power, the relations between macro and micro structures of power and between power and subjectivity (Olssen, 2003 p. 196). The relationship between the discursive and the extra-discursive is seen as central and, although Foucault did not see the state as all encompassing and as fully subsuming civil society, issues of the state and of political power are still important to his work (Olssen, et al. 2004 p. 23). He recognised the state as 'superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks that invest the body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology and so forth' (Foucault, 1980 p. 122) - views which are not inconsistent with those of Gramsci.

The materialist underpinnings provided by Foucault offer possibilities for policy analysis. Used in combination with structural approaches, a certain synergy can be gained which helps to inform a rounded, critical insight into the nature of educational change. In contrast, I would argue that the work of the later post-structuralists cannot give an account of the relationship between discourse and social practice. Whereas, in a Foucauldian approach, discursivity is related to context, a denial that policy texts can have real effects in the social world is implicit within some post-structural approaches. Their epistemology privileges language at the expense of material relations and adopts a distinctly anti-realist ontology that is incompatible with Marxism (Callinicos, 1989 p. 74-75). Rationalism and historical materialism are rejected and discourses of science or knowledge, for example, are viewed as relative constructs. In some cases the reality of the social world is construed as myth (Olssen et al. 2004 p. 33-34).

Whilst an understanding of individual subjective decisions and situational complexities does offer valuable insights, it needs to be emphasised that social phenomena are not played out within a void. Agency should not be conflated with freedom; it needs to be viewed within its

social, political and economic context. Discourses of gender, race and difference are constructed and power is conceived within an environment characterised by material inequalities and constraints - an understanding which underpins my work and can be seen in many instances. For example, in examining work-based learning, I acknowledge that programme workers on Entry to Employment (E2E) provision aimed at unemployed young people are able to exercise a degree of agency in programme delivery. It is also recognised that there are some opportunities for progressive practice on E2E programmes. However, it is argued that by concentrating largely on occupational socialisation and generic skills, E2E may nevertheless serve to promote an impoverished form of 'employability' for disadvantaged young people and help to reinforce and reconfigure the class-based divisions of labour that continue to characterise the English economy. Whilst there is a need to be cautious of economic reductionism, it is important to recognise that we live under capitalist relations. Whilst as Bernstein (1977a) states, education cannot be expected to compensate for the inequalities of society; it is nevertheless implicated in producing and reproducing the social divisions that characterise contemporary society.

Conclusion

In summary, the papers in this submission constitute a sustained critique of the further education system in England. There are multiple inter-connections between them which, collectively, show that over recent years FE has been subject to far-reaching and profound change. It is argued that a combination of related factors – neo-liberalism, globalisation, and dominant discourses of the knowledge economy – have acted in synergy to produce a highly performative and marketised sector. Although the history of further education has not been unproblematic and the 'reforms' of the recent past have ameliorated some of its previous excesses, I would nevertheless tend to agree with Coffield (2006) that, in many ways, FE is indeed a sector *running ever faster down the wrong road*. It is an environment which is complex and difficult to understand, both for those working and studying within it and for those outside the sector; it is subject to high levels of state regulation and intervention; and teaching and learning is increasingly impoverished and utilitarian. In the highly class-stratified system of English education, FE is positioned firmly at the lower end of the institutional hierarchy.

Although FE has always been a predominantly working class endeavour, the powerful structural forces that have been placed upon it from the 1980s onwards make a class-based analysis of further education more relevant than ever. Therefore, my analytical framework is informed by a strong strand of neo-Marxist thought. However, to assume that one theoretical paradigm, as an enclosed system of thought, is capable of fully explaining the social world is arguably problematic. By also engaging with ideas from outside the Marxian tradition my work aims to explain social relations in a reflexive and nuanced fashion. Through the application of a range of critical perspectives my work provides an original and coherent formulation of ideas that marks an advance in the understanding of further education. This is a perspective that

synthesises different views of social and educational change which can be described as essentially critical materialist. This approach has been used to rigorously analyse and critique further education and to make an original contribution to knowledge.

There is a critical analysis of contemporary policy developments and a consideration of their effects. This is evident throughout the papers, although it is particularly so in *Aiming higher* and *NEET solution?* A number of the publications make a significant contribution to scholarship on the history of further education. A range of sources are drawn upon to explore FE's past and to extend existing knowledge. Several of the papers provide new insights and make connections between current developments in further education and those of the past. The two gender papers explain the increasing feminisation of further education. Evidence from the UK and further a field is used to create an original explanation of the changing gender dynamics found in the sector. In the case of *Gender, work and identity* an original set of empirical data is drawn upon to capture the perspective of men on gender in FE. Finally, a range of existing ideas and concepts are applied to new and novel settings. Bernstein's work on pedagogic discourses and trainability is used alongside a range of literature on social inclusion, employability and the economy to analyse Entry to Employment provision; and, whilst discourses of creativity have been critiqued and applied to other sectors of education, the *Creativity and performativity* paper is the first to do so with reference to FE.

Taken together, this body of work provides a set of significant insights into the nature of further education in England which have been formulated to create a particular and original narrative.