

General further education colleges: the continuing dilemma of organisational culture

Andrew S. McCarroll & Steve Lambert

To cite this article: Andrew S. McCarroll & Steve Lambert (2023): General further education colleges: the continuing dilemma of organisational culture, Journal of Further and Higher Education, DOI: [10.1080/0309877X.2023.2250730](https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2250730)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2250730>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 04 Sep 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

General further education colleges: the continuing dilemma of organisational culture

Andrew S. McCarroll^a and Steve Lambert^b 

^aSenior Lecturer in Management, Department of Management, University of Chester, Chester, UK; ^bAssociate Professor of Educational Leadership, University of Chester, Chester, UK

ABSTRACT

The role of organisational culture in supporting organisational outcomes is well documented in the further education (FE) sector within the UK. The benefits of a strong and unifying culture are recognised as having a positive impact on staff and students. However, a cultural institutional dichotomy has been acknowledged between the business and educational needs of colleges within the FE sector since the advent of incorporation in 1993. This paper utilised an interpretive, hermeneutical approach to analyse the perceptions of principals, middle leaders and teachers, within three general further education colleges (GFECs) in England to determine if that dichotomy exists in their current operating environment. The paper concludes that while there are elements of a clash of business and education ideals, general further education college (GFEC) culture has moved beyond the narrative of being corporate and driven solely by the concept of performativity. The article contributes to the ongoing debate on FE purpose and establishes the importance of aligning macro and subcultures into a set of professional working practices within GFECs to support positive student outcomes.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 August 2022
Accepted 10 August 2023

KEYWORDS

FE; organisational culture; achievement; collaboration; survival

Introduction

This paper investigates the concept of organisational culture in three General Further Education College (hereafter colleges) settings through the perceptions of three participant groups: principals, middle managers and teachers. The cultural change experienced by colleges post the introduction of the Further and Higher Education Act (FHEA) 1992 is well documented (Feather 2016; Simkins and Lumby 2002; Smith 2015; Goddard-Patel and Whitehead 2000) and has contributed to an educational dichotomy concerning colleges as businesses versus the needs of their students (Ball 2003; Gleeson 2001). This dichotomy for colleges was a result of incorporation, out of local authority control, into quasi-autonomous organisations. This led to a clash between the business needs of newly established college corporations and the student-centred pedagogical practices of teachers (Elliott 1996).

The resulting culture within the Further Education (FE) sector has been shaped by policy context throughout the three decades following incorporation (Lucas and Crowther 2016). The FE sector post-incorporation became inextricably linked to neoliberal policies, promoted by the Thatcher governments of the 1980s. This led to an alignment of education to the priorities of the economy by providing choices to students who were increasingly seen as consumers of education and driving up standards through competition in the marketplace (Doherty 2007). The

CONTACT Andrew S. McCarroll  andy.mccarroll@chester.ac.uk  Senior Lecturer in Management, Department of Management, University of Chester, Chester, UK

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

utilisation of neoliberal economic policy by successive UK governments has reshaped the educational purpose of the FE sector to meet the requirements of a growing knowledge-based economy (Guthrie and Pierce 1990). Ball (2017) argues that neoliberalism is a paradoxical concept for the FE sector, as it requires the government to intervene in setting policy contexts to shape a certain set of free market principles through the introduction of new public management (NPM) and the rhetoric of necessity, for the sector to continually modernise. NPM in the current FE operating environment challenges leaders in colleges through the introduction of ever-changing educational policies and the utilisation of regulatory agencies, such as, inspectorates and funders, acting as levers of power for the government (Fletcher, Gravatt, and Sherlock 2015). Indeed, there has been significant criticism of individual institutional financial management, GFEC outcomes and individual leader's abilities to meet governmental priorities Ofsted's (2012, 2016). Annual reports by the then Chief Inspector of Education and Children's Services, Sir Michael Wilshaw, outlined weaknesses in the capacity of FE leadership. The reports highlighted that college leaders needed to acknowledge the core purpose of their organisation and that leadership needs to create a culture required to drive up standards and provide high-quality provision that meets the skills demand locally and nationally through the realignment of curriculum. An era of austerity and a reduction in funding for the sector have created an FE context of doing more for less, and this factor is still prevalent in the sector today (Fletcher, Gravatt, and Sherlock 2015; Dennis, Springbett, and Walker 2020).

Smith (2015) argues that colleges have been subject to a series of re-culturing processes post-incorporation which have been determined by policies of marketisation and subsequent regulation. This has led to leadership practice and the cultures that leaders create continuing to be challenged by marketisation which impacts teacher practices and professionalism (Ball 2003). Within the overarching organisational culture, a subset of departmental culture exists, created by teaching teams working towards organisational objectives by adhering to a set of shared values (Gaus, Tang, and Akil 2019; Schein 2017). Since incorporation, colleges have faced the reality of a clash of ideals between the governing corporation, leadership and teachers, highlighting the commodification of education and the introduction of new cultures. The widespread shifts in culture are driven by new leadership methods established through a process of sectoral modernisation (Smith 2015). Indeed, incorporation has been the catalyst for a change of personality for FE, whereby, corporate loyalty was underpinned by performance cultures, cultures produced by new forms of accountability and regulation, akin to that of the private sector organisations on performance-based outcomes (Ball 2003). A. Brown (1998) suggests that corporate cultures are seen as a formula for success and this identification by the business sector was recognised through forms of NPM by policymakers as the model for effective performance in the FE sector (Ball 2017).

Organisational culture context

Corporate cultures have become intertwined with corporate leadership (Schein 2017), built on practice, customs, beliefs and values (Collins 2021; Deal and Kennedy 1982) evident in an individual college. The FE sector and every college within it has a unique culture in relation to its own policy context and setting, and each organisation will have a dominant culture but can possess many subcultures, but importantly not every employee will fit into a specific type of culture (Schedlitzki and Edwards 2022; Mullins 2006). The cultural fit for staff in their college has changed since incorporation, with many teachers having outlined a feeling of becoming de-professionalised, in so much as they are expected to teach in a prescribed manner, which includes a recap of prior learning at the start of the lesson, some teaching for a few minutes before a student-based activity, repeated as necessary, before a plenary at the end of the lesson (Ball 2003; Boocock 2013; Wilkinson 2007). This prescribed method of instruction has resulted in a cultural shift with all staff understanding of where power is concentrated and used, and how leaders set cultures through a clearly defined set of organisational values.

Johnson and Scholes (1993) suggest that within all organisations, a cultural web exists, comprising soft and hard cultures. Soft culture comprises myths, stories and symbols. Changing the soft culture is both difficult and time consuming as it requires changes in behaviours (Collins 2021). However, where this is necessary in order to move the organisation in a different direction, a new language is needed which will create a new set of observed behaviours (Schein 2017).

In contrast, hard culture, is observable through organisational structures, through the location of power and process. It can be changed quickly, and the results can be seen quickly too. It is this hard culture that is driven by institutional leaders and how they use control systems to influence staff behaviours. Elliott (1996) and Randle and Brady (1997) point to the Further and Higher Education Act (FHEA) (1992) as the seminal piece of legislation that changed the culture in the FE sector through increased regulation, accountability and the creation of a culture of managerialism. This foundation for the sector post-incorporation produced a new set of beliefs and values for leaders in colleges to assimilate into their practice. The onset of new heroic leaders set a new direction for colleges and with it, a set of new business-oriented values, a form of cultural change through the consolidation of leadership power (Bush 2020; Simkins and Lumby 2002). Latta (2020) acknowledges how the top-down creation of organisational culture through the widespread use of leadership influence has the ability to legitimise the utilisation of power within an organisational context. However, as Locke and Maton (2019) acknowledge this created professional tension for many in the FE sector, as they now had to test their educational values against business performance requirements.

Performativity, managerialism and corporatism have all been used to describe the culture in FE (Ball 2003; Randle and Brady 1997; Simkins and Lumby 2002). The metaphor of machine and organism (Morgan 1986) is central to getting internal and external stakeholders to think about organisations in a contemporary way, linking the purpose of the organisation with the values and objectives it aspires to achieve (A. Brown 1998). A. Brown (1998) suggests that organisations are now political bodies, where politics and control of power are central to the setting of corporate culture (Collins 2021). Power, trust and autonomy all feed into the narrative of current educational environments (Jameson 2010) and this paper seeks to provide through the perceptions of principals, middle managers and teachers, the cultures present in colleges and whether followers in these institutions are accepting of these cultures.

FE organisational culture

As already mentioned, sub-cultures exist in colleges and vary according to the size of the organisation and the location of a homogenous group within that organisation (A. Brown 1998; Schedlitzki and Edwards 2022). Sub-cultures are built on communities of practice in college which on occasion can conflict with other departmental sub-cultures and often lack the agency to shape the macro culture of the institution (Feather 2016). Organisational practices acknowledge the power of leaders in setting organisational objectives, whereby values are used to achieve those goals and the subsequent macro culture they create. Culture in colleges reflects the hegemony of cultures of performance (Hadawi and Crabbe 2018; Lumby and Tomlinson 2000) and how the audit culture imposed on colleges created a macro-business culture for leaders and managers and a de-professionalised student-centred culture of teachers (Boocock 2013). This culture confused the purpose of the traditional FE landscape (Hadawi and Crabbe 2018) by creating a direct relationship between the sector and the national economy; FE had become the UK government's panacea to address the skills shortage in the country (Dennis, Springbett, and Walker 2020). Subcultures or silos are created by a set of shared assumptions (Collins 2021; Schein 2017) on how teachers can behave and complete tasks while trying to achieve the dichotomy of business and student needs (Shain and Gleeson 1999). However, culture and sub-cultures are shaped by the policymakers and leaders (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2012; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010; Schein 2017) in the FE sector and this has aligned with leadership development since the Act of Incorporation, as leaders have to engage with organisational culture to support the attainment

of organisational goals (Lumby 2012). Organisational culture is continually evolving in individual colleges and is interlinked with the behaviours of the leader and the institutional direction they require the organisation to take.

Leadership and college culture

The re-culturing of FE post-incorporation developed a masculine-management driven by NPM approaches to organising colleges (Boocock 2019; Smith 2015) which were challenged by a need for leaders to ameliorate the cultures present in their own college, to meet all stakeholder needs (Crowther 2013). FE became a fractured sector post-incorporation as colleges had to serve two masters, the needs of the skills agenda (emphasised by the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022) and their educational purpose (Locke and Maton 2019). The macro culture of the sector was one of the corporatisation, through NPM (Ball 2017), FE had become a politicised form of education which was significantly shaped by performance indicators (Boocock 2013).

Corporate cultures correlated with parallel heroic forms of leadership and were significantly shaped by the power of the leader, as power through the process of marketisation was centralised in the leader through a culture of power and regulation (Boocock 2019; Shain and Gleeson 1999). Aubrey and Bell (2017) state that this has become a shift in FE cultural ethos, from student-centred values to a process of strategic and enforced compliance. This created a culture of power in the leader and how they established trust-less relationships with their followers (Jameson 2010), who had decreased autonomy as professionals and became immersed in their task-orientated culture of ensuring students achieve, whatever the cost (Boocock 2014).

What is evident is that the power culture in FE is multi-dimensional and is linked to the approach of the leader and their willingness to distribute authority throughout the organisational hierarchy. A strong culture is desirable in any institution, linked to an overarching approach to engaging all staff through a set of shared values driven by the focus of the leader. The dominant culture in colleges is not based on equal power, and leaders may profit while teachers may be disadvantaged by the process (Lumby 2012). However, organisational performance relating to student outcomes is controlled through the use of leadership power and organisational culture (Kuo and Tsai 2019) and leaders must realise that their individual leadership approach will impact cultural creation and subsequent performance (Latta 2020). The dominant culture for the first-decade post-incorporation was that of performativity (Ball 2003) this placed a strain on principals' and teachers' relationships, with many teachers associating performance measures with changing colleges into educational production lines rather than places of learning (Feather 2016). This culture of performance was the reality of the changes enforced on the FE sector by neoliberal educational policies, and this process of NPM placed more responsibility on teachers to ensure students achieved, with this development, the role of teachers was to change which inevitably led to the long-term evolution of a new principal and teacher member exchange (Lumby 2003).

Methodology

The paper was informed by research intended to capture the interpretations of the participants' perceptions of the concept of organisational culture and how this contributes to the improvement of student outcomes. An interpretive hermeneutical approach was utilised which recognises that the process between researcher and participant creates the conditions to provide an understanding of social situations through the creation of meaningful relationships by analysing lived experiences. The study captured participants' perceptions of their world and generates information from the subjective meanings that they attach to their environment which is best achieved through an interpretive dialogue (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018; Wahyuni 2012). An interpretive paradigm provides the platform for a highly detailed analysis of participants' narratives which constructs the reality of living in their world (Gray 2022; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). An interpretive

approach acknowledges that the world does not operate independently of human knowledge (Grix 2019). Therefore, truly objective research positions are not realistic, the researcher has to subject participants' interpretations of social phenomena to their interpretations (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). This double hermeneutic meaning (Grix 2019) recognises that individuals encounter the world differently and, therefore, interpretivism supports a shared pattern of meaning between the researcher and participant (Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

Hermeneutics is concerned with meanings and language and is a useful supportive construct for this research approach (Laverty 2003). The study acknowledges the view of Crotty (1998, 88) who argues that hermeneutics is defined as a 'method for deciphering indirect meaning, a reflective practice of unmasking hidden meaning beneath apparent ones'. This approach can provide an outlet for participants to discuss their lived experiences, and their emic or insider view of the research concepts within their own GFEC setting (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). Mertens (2010) argues that a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions through an interpretive approach can be a transformative process by producing valuable information from a shared understanding of social meaning. Interpretive hermeneutics supports a reflective approach to gaining useful qualitative information, but the researcher must aim to achieve 'empathetic neutrality' (Ormston et al. 2014, 22) which reduces the impact of their etic or external views. Questions were designed to elicit information from the target groups (Gray 2022), providing them with the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of key issues within their institution and challenges impacting the sector. The questions had meaning for the participants and, therefore, supported them to tell their lived experiences.

The study examined the reality of three participant groups and how they view and engage with their organisational cultures. The sampling unit was three general further education colleges in England, engaged through a convenience sampling process (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). The three principals of the colleges supported a self-selection process for a middle manager (defined as those managers who report to a member of the college's senior management team or equivalent) and teacher within their institution through an email and volunteer sampling process (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2019). This could present a potential issue for the research, as the power imbalance between the Principal and participants could produce a coerced or potentially influenced participant. At the start of each interview with the non-principal participants, any possible influence from their Principals was discussed, and all responded that this was not the case. This was apparent within their interviews, all were able to discuss issues freely and openly, and participants used challenging language when they described issues relating to their specific GFEC. The total participant size is small, nine. Although small, this was done deliberately to generate and interpret detailed and rich individual perspectives (Grix 2019) on the culture(s) present in their settings. It is worth noting that the findings are not generalisable due to the limitations of the sample size. The three colleges were different in relation to size, location and Ofsted inspection grading. Payne's (2008) is useful in describing the relationships between college size, Ofsted grades and financial health, identifying that there is little correlation between institutional size, financial health and student outcomes. However, individual colleges face different challenges and external factors are more likely to determine the financial health and student outcomes (Hadawi and Crabbe 2018). The UK government's, Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (2019) outline seven domains of deprivation. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) provides the operating context of each GFEC. Table 1 provides an overview of GFEC operating environments and organisational context.

Table 1. GFEC operating environment.

GFEC	Ofsted Grade (full inspection)	Size (Payne 2008)	Level of Deprivation (IMD-Decile)	Student Population (all types – SLN)	Location(s)
GFEC 1	2 (CIF)	Medium	6	6,000	Rural
GFEC 2	2 (EIF)	Large	4	9,000	Urban
GFEC 3	1 (CIF)	Medium	7	6,500	Urban

The nine participants formed three groups. Three principals, three middle managers who have academic responsibility for a curriculum area in their college and three teachers who worked within the middle manager's curriculum area. A cross-sectional interview process was conducted over 2 months in 2020.

The main emphasis of the interviews was to explore the following questions:

- How would you describe the culture in the College?
- What drives the culture in the College?
- What are the institutional outcomes you are trying to achieve?
- Is there alignment between team and the organisation's culture?
- Can you describe the purpose of FE – your College in the process?
- Are there new challenges given the changing FE environment?

Participant perspectives were analysed by the institution and as a participant cohort. Once the interviews were transcribed, the raw data were drawn together through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013) to condense the data into manageable streams which have a direct correlation with the research topic. Thematic analysis complemented an interpretive hermeneutical approach which proved to be pivotal for the research in understanding the language of the participants and reflecting the reality of their FE settings (Crotty 1998).

Searching data by group and through a holistic approach produced themes which were overt, highlighting comparable and contrasting patterns (Alhojailan 2012). This was conducted through a complete coding method, a method identifying everything and anything of interest in relation to the research concepts which enabled an establishment of theme relationships (Braun and Clarke 2013). Coding was conducted manually, and the review of data produced three prominent themes which required further analysis, the themes were coded as follows:

- (1) Leadership approaches.
- (2) Competing cultural priorities.
- (3) Educational purpose.

Coding themes into informative categories provided an overview of relevant data for further analysis which made the production of in-depth findings easier for the research process (Joffe 2012).

Ethics

Research is an incremental process and throughout every stage of this parochial study, ethical issues were constantly reviewed. Through careful and radical forms of enquiry, the research was equipped to tell the stories of the participants and provide valid meaning to their educational reality (Clough and Nutbrown 2012). Although the study is a small-scale research task, researcher bias was at the forefront of the authors thinking from the research design stage until research completion. Conscious of our own educational values and beliefs, the research reflected on the possible misinterpretation of participant interpretations (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009) and at every stage reviewed the validity of information gathered through interviews and how much actual voice we had given each participant when they told their story (Shar, 2009).

Conscious of the potentially intrusive nature of a semi-structured interview into their educational reality, the study reassured participants through the issue of a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and the signing of an informed consent form. Informed consent is valuable to any research task and outlines the withdrawal mechanism for participants and how their data will be stored and utilised. The research concepts being analysed in the study were not sensitive and have been discussed in other texts (Ball 2003; Boocock 2019; Lumby 2003, 2012) which removed any need to hold information back from participants; this supported an open and honest ethical approach (Denscombe 2014).

Openness was achieved through reflexive positioning throughout the research which supported the production of quality data which provides the paper with value; systemic reflection endows interpretation and was achieved through a hermeneutical examination of researcher and participant dialogue (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009).

Search strategy

A systematic review of literature was conducted to identify studies relating to the concepts of organisational culture, performance and leadership within the FE sector in the UK. The timeline started from the act of incorporation in 1993. The search included nine databases, covering various disciplinary fields: EBSCO, Ingenta Connect, Emerald Education, Sage Premier, Open Access E Journals, Wiley Online, Taylor Francis Online and ABI/INFORM Global. Google Scholar supplemented the search strategy. The databases were searched by using a combination of keywords: 'Further Education culture', 'FE Culture', 'education culture', 'organisational culture', 'FE performance', 'FE policy' and 'FE performance and improvement'. The search employed other related synonyms and related concepts to collect and collate an overview of relevant studies.

Findings and discussion

The three principals were able to suggest what culture is and what it looked like in their institutions. All three acknowledged that it shaped their organisations concerning how it operated (Collins 2021; Deal and Kennedy 1982) and that it existed at many levels and in different forms (Schein 2017). Indeed, their dialogue through interviews produced a recognition that the culture of the further education sector had changed to be aligned more with that of a business culture (A. Brown 1998; McCarthy and Dragouni 2021) due to the political environment and the requirements of regulation and funding. There was a recognition that cultures in their institutions had become their way of life (Williams 1963) and these were primarily a top-down approach to mirror their organisational values. Indeed, Principal 2 stated that *'the way I act as the leader drives the culture in the College'*, highlighting the importance of leadership in establishing culture (Lumby 2012). Principals 1 and 3 stated similar attitudes relating to their leadership and its impact on institutional culture, Principal 3 highlighted the perceptions of both principals, that their *'leadership is used to impact on the culture'* and that *'it was utilised for the creation of a positive working environment'*. All three principals highlighted the importance of their local context and how the context of the skills requirements and the needs of their students impacted on their leadership approach and culture they supported to create. There was an acknowledgement that although policy and priorities shaped organisational contexts, principals aspired to create an institutional culture and identity (Alvesson 2013; Ravasi 2016), a way of working for staff, clearly observable by students and external stakeholders. An identity unique from other similar institutions, shaped by the culture creation driven by the college principal. The research underpins this point, outlining that principals can and do shape their institutions based on internal and external factors, such as, the skills need and external agency pressures, for example Ofsted and funding agencies.

What was very apparent in their language concerning culture creation was that all three principals actively spoke against the idea of corporatism. Principal 1 was positive that their institutional culture was *'not corporate, but a collegial drive to sustain and improve the college'*. All three described positive, progressive, warm, friendly and professional cultures they had implemented and aspired to sustain. Principals outlined a recognition of neoliberalism (Gilbert 2016) in education but rejected the influence of neoliberal and capitalist ideas impacting on their institutions' operations. This implies an aspiration that principals are determined to create an ethical and equitable working environment which should impact positively on staff performance and organisational outcomes (Jameson 2010). However, it does suggest a lack of understanding regarding the impact of culture; a recognition of neoliberalism should acknowledge the impact of adhering to its rules and regulations on

institutional operations and, therefore, culture. Middle manager (MM) 3 and Teacher 3 agreed with the cultural context outlined by their principal. MM 3 suggested that *'it feels like we are working together for the needs of our students at a focused and local level, it really is positive'*.

However, MM 1 and 2 and Teachers 1 and 2 described through their experiences a more business and performance-oriented culture, but there was also recognition of the aspirations of the principals to create a collegial culture in their institutions. The participants in college 2 were the most vocal in their dialogue about a culture of achievement and a culture of pressure driven by a need for survival (Dennis, Springbett, and Walker 2020). MM 2 and Teacher 2 recognised that they have been subject to a performative culture (Boocock 2013) driven by organisational direction and survival. MM 2 outlined that *'it can be seriously pressurised every day, but that's the nature of the business'*. The theme of survival was highlighted by 8 of the 9 participants as a major concern, both from a personal and organisational perspective. Principal 2 recognised the imperative for personal and GFEC survival which could *'only be achieved through improved institutional outcomes'*. MM 2 stated that *'for me, it's all about the students achieving but the culture is about achievement – that's it, all achievement'*. Their narrative on cultures acknowledged the impact of performance measures and funding cuts (Ball 2003; Lucas and Crowther 2016) on the academic sub-cultures and the macro-culture of their institution. Participants in colleges 1 and 2 attitudinal data provide some context to the impact of the capitalist policy agenda of government on education (Fisher 2009) and provides evidence to suggest that leadership does drive culture in their institutions, however, and more importantly, that there is an acceptance of a new set of business and student-centred priorities. The data outlines that performance is an acknowledged and central tenet of the middle manager and teacher's practice. Indeed, this outlines that leader's creation of an inclusive culture does not totally mitigate the inherent nature of performativity (Ball 2003). All middle manager and teacher participants suggested that leadership and shared values drive the formation of cultures in their colleges; however, academic sub-cultures did exist which recognise performance metrics but were more focused on student outcomes from a teacher and middle manager pedagogical perspective. The teachers described their sub-cultures as strong and supportive of colleagues and there was evidence in the attitudinal data of a teacher culture, separate from the ideas of a managerial culture; a culture with total concern for student progression and achievement which created tension with any concern for performative measures (Boocock 2013; Elliott 1996).

The cultural aspirations of principals outlined in the research data were to create harmonious operating environments; however, the equity of operating within these cultures did not always meet staff needs (Randle and Brady 1997; McCarthy and Dragouni 2021) as the type of culture created by the leader is used as a tool to improve performance (Lumby 2012). Colleges 1 and 2 were inadvertently creating cultures which covertly require adherence to a business-oriented, performance-driven culture which have placed middle managers as the buffer between leadership and teacher priorities (Thompson and Wolstencroft 2013). College 3 is in a different position regarding its performance and, therefore, can realise a culture which recognises the importance of performative measures (Ball 2003) but not to the extent that it is allowed to impact their focus on all aspects of the student journey. All Principals stressed their frustration at the continually changing FE landscape and were continually challenged by the next policy focus from the government. What made this more challenging was the lack of full control over their operations. Indeed, Principal 2 stated that the current policy context made them an *'instrument of government, through funding restriction and regulation'*, a view also voiced by the other two principals. All participants recognised the issues of self-interest and survival (Boocock 2013; Dennis, Springbett, and Walker 2020) and the challenges this presented for institutional culture. Indeed, middle managers and teachers outlined how this was experienced from an institutional and individual perspective. MM 2 outlined that *'it is all about the numbers sometimes, if its not students, its achievement and if it is not that its attendance'*. Research participants recognised the imperative for personal and organisational survival which will be realised through improved institutional outcomes and a collaborative approach, but it must be acknowledged that this is shaped by the external educational policy environment (Hadawi and Crabbe 2018).

The ever-changing policy context for FE is symptomatic of UK governmental educational expectations, survival is not just an FE challenge, it exists in other educational settings (Earley 2020; Loveday 2021). Indeed, the accountability and performance culture in UK education has developed educational cultures which normalise managerialism and regulation and question educators' identities (Loveday 2021).

Conclusions

This paper outlined through participant perceptions that elements of corporate cultures exist within colleges, and this concept is still prevalent due to the early forms of managerialism and the ever-changing financial and performance measures implemented by regulatory agencies. The paper acknowledges that these levers of power (Fletcher, Gravatt, and Sherlock 2015) hold significant meaning for all staff and remain a focus for principals and middle managers, but act as more of a distraction for teachers. The findings suggest that principals (participating in this study) reject the idea of corporatism but understand the levels of adherence required to mitigate significant regulatory interference. Principals also understood the ability of their approach to leadership in shaping institutional culture, and they outline a shift away from the legacy of managerialism to a macro-institutional culture (Schein 2017) which should be based on shared values and has the ability to meet all stakeholder expectations. The data highlights how colleges, through the leadership of principals, recognise the requirements of a neoliberal educational policy (Ball 2017) and the reality of a capitalist (Fisher 2009) driven skills agenda. However, they aspire to build trust and empowerment of staff (Jameson 2010) through a process of collaboration which supports positive institutional outcomes (Harris 2014). Indeed, the findings suggest that there are three levels of focus for participant groups in relation to what matters to their practice which outlines the dichotomy which is present in GFECs (Smith 2015). The data highlighted the following:

- **principals** – focus holistically on institutional business and student needs;
- **middle managers** – focus on business, however, very student aware; and
- **teachers** – focus on students, however, very business aware.

The research acknowledges a wider cultural narrative, one of the ever-changing policy contexts for education in the UK and the careful balance required between accepting regulation and accountability as an issue of individual and institutional survival (Loveday 2021) which questions the values of FE (Dennis, Springbett, and Walker 2020). These findings suggest that leadership awareness is central to management practice and this element of the research warrants further investigation which could be developed through a reflective conceptual framework (K. M. Brown 2006). This could support college leaders in their decision-making processes. Additionally, that one shared mission for all staff in a college is an inclusive approach to galvanise staff and improve institutional outcomes. Moreover, academic sub-cultures reflect the existing tensions within different groups and departments, all of whom utilise different languages to address the issues which concern them (Schein 2017). Individual departmental way of life (Williams 1963) and educational purpose may be different from college principals, but it is imperative for positive college performance that principals align the sub-culture with the overall organisational mission (Schein 2017). This can be achieved through a covert form of leadership power being exercised by the principal to ensure that cultural alignment is achieved (Lumby 2012) through a recognition by all levels that there is a requirement to meet institutional goals, some of which will be linked to performance measures. The adherence to metrics and recognition of performativity existing in colleges is captured in the findings from the participating institutions. However, this paper outlines that these institutions and their cultures have moved beyond a passive form of teacher resistance (Jameson 2010) to performance measures, to a culture of student focus with a requirement to fulfil embedded and standardised college performativity

metrics. The strive for the creation of inclusive cultures which recognise the requirements of evolving forms of regulation is now becoming commonplace in college settings. This suggests that cultures within colleges have adapted from cultures of managerialism (Lumby 2003) and performativity (Ball 2003) to cultures which recognise that leaders retain power and set the parameters for culture with staff; therefore, the process is collegial and not prescriptive. However, the study supports the views expressed by C. A. Dennis, O. Springbett, and L. Walker (2020) that for FE to survive in the future and uphold its traditional teaching values, GFEC culture needs to recognise but not justify regulation and accountability.

The strategic compliance of the decade post-incorporation (Shain and Gleeson 1999) has transitioned to colleges recognising performance measures as a central characteristic of institutional practice; however, this is now viewed by the college through a cultural lens which has returned to one of significant student focus. Colleges are concerned with survival (Boocock 2013) by internally supporting staff and by externally demonstrating improved outcomes. The increasing pressures and requirements for principals and their colleges to meet an agenda of localism is a current factor in shaping principals' behaviours which has an impact on the culture they stimulate within their institution (Boocock 2019; Western 2019). The findings support this view and reinforce the importance of the situational forces of government policy, regulatory measures and the needs of stakeholders in setting direction for principals and the subsequent shaping of institutional cultures into a set of assumptions and shared behaviours to meet the strategic need (A. Brown 1998). However, although shaped by government policy, individual institutions strive for and maintain an individual culture and identity. A recognition of an institutional 'us' (Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2020), different from other colleges in the sector. Colleges have macro and subcultures which are compatible with organisational goals, shaped by principal behaviours into a professional set of working practices which strive to meet all stakeholder requirements. This view reinforces the sense of survival understood by FE leaders. Survival can be achieved through the development and maintenance of an adaptable and shared community culture between leaders and staff which recognises the need to meet regulatory metrics, but importantly fulfilling student and local skills requirements (Hadawi and Crabbe 2018).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Steve Lambert  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4642-4717>

References

- Alhojailan, M.-I. 2012. "Thematic Analysis: A Critical Review of Its Process and Evaluation." *West East Journal of Social Sciences* 1 (1): 39–47.
- Alvesson, M. 2013. *Understanding Organizational Culture*. 2nd ed. London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- Alvesson, M., and K. Sköldbberg. 2009. *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*. London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- Aubrey, K., and L. Bell. 2017. "Teacher Education in Further Education 2000-2010: Subversion, Avoidance and Compliance." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 41 (2): 99–111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2015.1062846>.
- Ball, S. J. 2003. "The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity." *Journal of Education Policy* 18 (2): 215–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093022000043065>.
- Ball, S. J. 2017. *The Education Debate*. 3rd ed. Bristol, United Kingdom: Policy Press.
- Boocock, A. 2013. "Further Education Performance Indicators: A Motivational or a Performative Tool?" *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 18 (3): 309–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2013.819272>.

- Boocock, A. 2014. "Increased Success Rates in an FE College: The Product of a Rational or a Performative College Culture?" *Journal of Education and Work* 27 (4): 351–371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2012.758356>.
- Boocock, A. 2019. "Meeting the Needs of Local Communities and Businesses: From Transactional to Eco-Leadership in the English Further Education Sector." *Education Management Administration and Leadership* 47 (3): 349–368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217739364>.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2013. *Successful Qualitative Research*. London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- Brown, A. 1998. *Organisational Culture*. 2nd ed. London, United Kingdom: Financial Times Management.
- Brown, K. M. 2006. "Leadership for Social Justice and Equity: Evaluating a Transformative Framework and Andragogy." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 42 (5): 700–745. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X06290650>.
- Bush, T. 2020. "Turnaround Leadership in Education: A Restatement of Heroic Leadership or a Flawed Concept." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 48 (1): 3–5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143219877629>.
- Clough, P., and C. Nutbrown. 2012. *A Students' Guide to Methodology: Justifying Enquiry*. 3rd ed. London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- Cohen, L., L. Manion, and K. Morrison. 2018. *Research Methods in Education*. 8th ed. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Collins, D. 2021. *Rethinking Organisational Culture: Redeeming Culture Through Stories*. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Crotty, M. 1998. *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*. London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- Crowther, C. (2013). "Leading Learning Organisations: An Analysis of Leadership in the Further Education and Skills Sector." *Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS)*. <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv:59229>.
- Deal, T. E., and A. A. Kennedy. 1982. *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Dennis, C. A., O. Springbett, and L. Walker. 2020. "Further Education College Leaders: Securing the Sector's Future." *Futures* 115 (102478): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.102478>.
- Denscombe, M. 2014. *The Good Research Guide*. 4th ed. Maidenhead, United Kingdom: Open University Press.
- Denzin, N. K, and Y. S. Lincoln. 2011. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Doherty, R. A. 2007. "Education, Neoliberalism and the Consumer Citizen: After the Golden Age of Egalitarian Reform." *Critical Studies in Education* 48 (2): 269–288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508480701494275>.
- Earley, P. 2020. "Surviving, Thriving and Reviving in Leadership: The Personal and Professional Development Needs of Educational Leaders." *Management in Education* 34 (3): 117–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020620919763>.
- Elliott, G. 1996. "Educational Management and the Crisis of Reform in Further Education." *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 48 (1): 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305787960480101>.
- Feather, D. 2016. "Organisational Culture of Further Education Colleges Delivering Higher Education Business Programmes: Developing a Culture of 'Heness' – What Next?" *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 21 (1–2): 98–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2015.1125669>.
- Fisher, M. 2009. *Capitalist Realism Is There No Real Alternative?* Winchester, United Kingdom: Zero Books.
- Fletcher, M., J. Gravatt, and D. Sherlock. 2015. "Levers of Power: Funding, Inspection and Performance Management." In *The Coming of Age for FE? Reflections on the past and Future Role of Further Education Colleges in England*, edited by A. Hodgson, 178–198. London, United Kingdom: Institute of Education Press.
- Gaus, N., M. Tang, and M. Akil. 2019. "Organisational Culture in Higher Education: Mapping the Way to Understanding Cultural Research." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 43 (6): 848–860. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1410530>.
- Gilbert, J. 2016. "What Kind of Thing Is Neoliberalism?" In *Neoliberal Culture*, edited by J. Gilbert, 10–32. London, United Kingdom: Lawrence and Wishart Limited.
- Gleeson, D. 2001. "Style and Substance in Education Leadership: Further Education (FE) as a Case in Point." *Journal of Education Policy* 16 (3): 181–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930110041015>.
- Goddard-Patel, P., and S. Whitehead. 2000. "Examining the Crisis of Further Education: An Analysis of 'Failing' Colleges and Failing Policies." *Policy Studies* 21 (3): 191–212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442870020019499>.
- Gray, D. E. 2022. *Doing Research in the Real World*. 5th ed. London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- Grix, J. 2019. *The Foundations of Research*. 3rd ed. London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Guthrie, J. W., and L. C. Pierce. 1990. "The International Economy and National Education Reform: A Comparison of Education Reforms in the United States and Great Britain." *Oxford Review of Education* 16 (2): 179–205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305498900160203>.
- Hadawi, A., and M. J. C. Crabbe. 2018. "Developing a Mission for Further Education: Changing Culture Using Non-Financial and Intangible Value." *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 23 (1): 118–137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2018.1421011>.
- Harris, A. 2014. *Distributed Leadership Matters: Perspectives, Practicalities and Potential*. London, United Kingdom: Corwin Press.
- Haslam, S. A., S. D. Reicher, and M. J. Platow. 2020. *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power*. 2nd ed. London, United Kingdom: Routledge.

- Hofstede, G., G. J. Hofstede, and M. Minkov. 2010. *Culture and Organisations: Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival*. 3rd ed. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Jameson, J. 2010. "Trust and Leadership in Post-Compulsory Education: Some Snapshots of Displaced Dissent." *Power and Education* 2 (1): 48–62. <https://doi.org/10.2304/power.2010.2.1.48>.
- Joffe, H. 2012. "Thematic Analysis." In *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy: A Guide for Students and Practitioners*, edited by D. Harper and A. Thompson, 209–223. Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley Blackwell.
- Johnson, G., and K. Scholes. 1993. *Exploring Corporate Strategy: Text and Cases*. London, United Kingdom: Prentice Hall.
- Kuo, T., and G. Y. Tsai. 2019. "The Effects of Employee Perceived Organisational Culture on Performance: The Moderating Effects of Management Maturity." *Total Quality Management* 30 (3–4): 267–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14783363.2017.1302327>.
- Latta, G. F. 2020. "Modelling the Interaction of Leadership, Culture and Power in Higher Education." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 44 (9): 1188–1206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1669770>.
- Laverty, S. M. 2003. "Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2 (3): 21–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690300200303>.
- Locke, P., and K. Maton. 2019. "Serving Two Masters: How Vocational Educators Experience Marketisation Reforms." *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 71 (1): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2018.1480521>.
- Loveday, V. 2021. "Under Attack': Responsibility, Crisis and Survival Anxiety Amongst Manager-Academics in UK Universities." *The Sociological Review* 69 (5): 903–919. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026121999209>.
- Lucas, N., and N. Crowther. 2016. "The Logic of the Incorporation of Further Education Colleges in England 1993–2015: Towards an Understanding of Marketisation, Change and Instability." *Journal of Education Policy* 31 (5): 583–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2015.1137635>.
- Lumby, J. 2003. "Culture Change: The Case of Sixth Form and General Further Education Colleges." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 31 (2): 159–174.
- Lumby, J. 2012. "Leading Organisational Culture: Issues of Power and Equity." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 40 (5): 576–591. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143212451173>.
- Lumby, J., and H. Tomlinson. 2000. "Principals Speaking: Managerialism and Leadership in Further Education." *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 5 (2): 139–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596740000200073>.
- McCarthy, D., and M. Dragouni. 2021. "Managerialism in UK Business Schools: Capturing the Interactions between Academic Job Characteristics, Behaviour and the 'Metrics' Culture." *Studies in Higher Education* 46 (11): 2338–2354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1723524>.
- Mertens, D.M. 2010. *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology: Integrating Diversity with Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Methods*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2019). "The English Indices of Deprivation 2019 (Iod 2019)." https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/835115/IoD2019_Statistical_Release.pdf.
- Morgan, G. 1986. *Images of Organisation*. London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- Mullins, L. J. 2006. *Essentials of Organisational Behaviour*. London, United Kingdom: Prentice Hall.
- Ofsted (2012). "The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2011/12." HMSO.
- Ofsted (2016). "The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2015/16." HMSO.
- Ormston, R., L. Spencer, M. Barnard, and D. Snape. 2014. "The Foundations of Qualitative Research." In *Qualitative Research Practice*, edited by J. Ritchie, J. Lewis, C. McNaughton-Nicholls, and R. Ormston, 1–26. 2nd ed. London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- Payne, L. 2008. *The Evidence Base on College Size and Mergers in the Further Education Sector. Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills*. London, United Kingdom: Stationary Office.
- Randle, K., and N. Brady. 1997. "Managerialism and Professionalism in the Cinderella Service." *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 49 (1): 121–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636829700200007>.
- Ravasi, D. 2016. "Organizational Identity, Culture, and Image." In *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Identity*, edited by M. Schultz, B. E. Ashforth, and D. Ravasi, 65–78. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Saunders, M. N. K., P. Lewis, and A. Thornhill. 2019. *Research Methods for Business Students*. 8th ed. Harlow, United Kingdom: Pearson Education.
- Schedlitzki, D., and G. Edwards. 2022. *Studying Leadership: Traditional and Critical Approaches*. 3rd ed. London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- Schein, E. H. 2017. *Organisational Culture and Leadership*. 5th ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Shain, F., and D. Gleeson. 1999. "Under New Management: Changing Conceptions of Teacher Professionalism and Policy in the Further Education Sector." *Journal of Education Policy* 14 (4): 445–462. <https://doi.org/10.1080/026809399286288>.
- Sharp, J. G. 2009. *Success with Your Education Research Project*. Exeter, United Kingdom: Learning Matters.

- Simkins, T., and J. Lumby. 2002. "Cultural Transformation in Further Education? Mapping the Debate." *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 7 (1): 9–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596740200200116>.
- Smith, R. 2015. "College Re-Culturing, Marketisation and Knowledge: The Meaning of Incorporation." *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 47 (1): 18–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2015.974145>.
- Thompson, C., and P. Wolstencroft. 2013. "Promises and Lies: An Exploration of Curriculum Managers' Experiences in Fe." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 38 (1): 1–14.
- Trompenaars, F., and C. Hampden-Turner. 2012. *Riding the Waves of Culture*. 3rd ed. London, United Kingdom: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Wahyuni, D. 2012. "The Research Design Maze: Understanding Paradigms, Cases, Methods and Methodologies." *Journal of Applied Management Accounting Research* 10 (1): 69–80.
- Western, S. 2019. *Leadership: A Critical Text*. 3rd ed. London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- Wilkinson, G. 2007. "Civic Professionalism: Teacher Education and Professional Ideals and Values in a Commercialised Education World." *Journal of Education for Teaching* 33 (3): 379–395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607470701450593>.
- Williams, R. 1963. *Culture and Society 1780–1950*. London, United Kingdom: Penguin Random House.