"Very positive" or "vague and detached"? Unpacking ambiguities in further education teachers' responses to professional standards in England.

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Abstract

During the last two decades, a number of successive policy initiatives have attempted to professionalise the further education sector in England: professional qualifications have been rewritten, made compulsory and then returned to voluntary status; professional bodies have been established, briefly promoted, and then neglected; professional licenses have been considered and rejected; and a new professional status has been introduced. This article, which combines both theoretical and empirical perspectives, argues that all of these processes of professionalisation are problematic due to the inherent flaws in any set of professional standards, and that the ambiguous manner in which the latest set of professional standards is being read and understood by practitioners within the sector reflects a continuation of a flawed process of professionalisation in further education that has been underway since 1999.

Key words

Further education; professional standards; professionalism; professionalisation.

Introduction: professionalising the further education sector in England

During the last two decades or so, successive government policies have been enacted in England that have served to redefine professionalism within the teaching profession. These processes of professionalisation have been extensively explored in relation to schools, less so in relation to further education (FE) colleges. They can be conveniently summarised as being situated within a neoliberal discourse of education and training policy, characterised by a power imbalance between teachers and the state, privileging compliance over critique, and characterising teaching in terms of professional competence as opposed to professional knowledge, leading in turn to a process of professional fragmentation that has removed teachers from discussions relating to the construction or understanding of professionalism (Gray and Whitty, 2010).

However, notwithstanding the changes to initial teacher training for schools in England that have been enacted by the Coalition and Conservative governments since 2009, the status of professional education and training for teachers in schools remains more highly developed than the equivalent provision for teachers in further education colleges, adult education centres, community education, and work-based education settings. It was not until the early 1990s that any serious moves towards the regulation of initial teacher education for the further education (FE) sector (here taken to include those wider contexts referred

1

to above, and referred to as the FE sector simply for the purposes of brevity) were made. Several key steps were taken at this time, all of which can be seen as contributing to a process of professionalisation for the sector: the publication in 1999 of an agreed set of professional standards; the decision in 2000 to make professional qualifications for teachers in the sector compulsory; and the publication of a statutory instrument in 2001 to require these qualifications to be based on the new professional standards. It is a relatively straightforward task to view such measures in the light of any one of a number of models of professionalism and professionalisation as being beneficial to the sector as well as to the teaching workforce. The requirement for teachers to be qualified and the publication of a set of standards both to codify the knowledge base of the profession and to hold that profession to account, all speak to well-established discourses of professionalism and professionalisation, processes that the sector – characterised by fragmentation, variability in teaching, and a lack of an agreed model of professional qualification and formation – badly needed (Eraut, 1994; Lucas, 2004; Nasta, 2007).

At the time of writing, two decades have passed since the consultation period that led up to the publication of the first set of professional standards for FE teachers. So what is the current condition of professionalism within the FE sector? We find that professional qualifications are now – once again – voluntary, not compulsory: a voluntarism that has been justified in terms of employer-led flexibility. We find a sector that is now coming to terms with the third set of professional standards to have been imposed on the teaching workforce over the last sixteen years. Teacher education for the sector remains variable in terms of academic levels, credit structures, and assessment regimes (Lucas, Nasta and Rogers, 2012). It remains underfunded, and poorly integrated within wider human resources structures within the college sector, a reflection of the fragmented nature of the FE landscape (O'Dwyer and Thorpe, 2013). One professional body has come and gone, and another – distinctly employer-led rather than member-led – has taken its place (Tummons, 2014a). Professional qualifications continue to be characterised by a lack of propositional knowledge (Loo, 2014). By any measure, the processes of professionalisation that the first two sets of standards might have been hoped to promulgate, must be seen as having been only very partially successful, at best.

From a 'top-down' perspective, the current condition of professionalism and professionalisation within FE can be seen as being symptomatic of a sector that is, more widely, as fragmented and vulnerable to political and economic change as it has ever been (Bailey and Unwin, 2014; Finlay et al., 2007; Robson, 1998). Changing focus to concentrate instead on the view from the ground, however – the ant's-eye perspective (Latour, 2005) – provides opportunities to unpack these various attempts at professionalisation from the perspective of practitioners in the sector, and this is the approach that is adopted within this article.

A framework for inquiry

The argument and data presented in this article forms part of a longer inquiry that seeks to explore the impact of and responses to subsequent iterations of professional standards for teachers and trainers in the further education sector: the Further Education National Training Organisation standards (FENTO – published in 1999), the Lifelong Learning UK standards (LLUK – published in 2006), and the Education and Training Foundation Standards (ETF – published in 2014). The starting point for this inquiry – based on a

framework that will be described below – is: what have these different iterations of professional standards actually accomplished? What do they actually do? These questions in turn rest on the assumption that for the standards to do anything at all, in the first place they have to be picked up, or downloaded, and read by someone before they can be acted upon, argued over, or simply ignored: texts can't do very much unless they are read by some people (Tummons 2014a, 2014b). Put simply, any of the three sets of professional standards that are being explored here need to be considered as textual artefacts – as fixed text-based forms that are published with the express intention on the part of the authors and sponsors of the text that they should be circulated, discussed, or pored over.

A critical and theoretically-informed exploration of the professional standards as artefacts leads us to position the standards as documents that are intended to convey particular messages, meanings, or discourses, which are intended for the people to whom the documents are addressed once they have been authored. In considering the standards as artefacts, however, there are three problematic factors that need to be explicated. Each one introduces an element of complexity to the treatment of the standards as artefacts, and although each one is derived from a distinct theoretical perspective, these same perspectives can be seen as being related, because they all share similar epistemological and ontological assumptions, occupying relativist and interpretivist positions. Combined, they form the conceptual framework that underpins the research reported here. I shall briefly outline these complex and problematic factors in turn.

The first is derived from theories of literacy as social practice, the 'New Literacy Studies' (Barton, 1994; Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1996), and suggests that no such textual document can carry a single, agreed, inherent meaning or body of meaning. Any act of reading always involves a process of negotiation of meaning, in which the reader brings her or his own understanding, attitudes, experiences, social and cultural milieu, and history to the text that is being read. The meaning that is constructed by any one reader is thus relational and capable of being more or less closely aligned to what was initially intended by the author(s) of the text.

The second is derived from Actor-Network Theory (ANT), a sociological perspective that provides the researcher with conceptual tools to consider how social projects are accomplished (Fenwick and Edwards, 2010; Law 1994, 2004; Latour, 2005). This perspective suggests that it is important to remember that meaning-making is further problematised by distance: as any literacy artefact travels – across institutional, organisational or geographic boundaries – the work that it can do relies on how it is received when it arrives at its destination(s): assuming that the artefact is not lost, forgotten or destroyed *en route*, it then still needs to be read for the meaning-making process to be activated.

The third factor is derived from theories of learning situated within communities of practice (Tummons, 2014c; Wenger, 1998), suggesting that the reification of any artefact, including a literacy artefact such as a set of professional standards, is always a problematic process: it is uncertain at best that any such document can satisfactorily capture and make concrete in written form, the themes, issues, concepts and ideas that it purports to so capture.

To summarise, the conceptual framework presented here positions any set of professional standards, including the three that are specifically the focus of this article, as being inherently problematic. They are incapable of being endowed with a single, unproblematised meaning or body of meanings. Instead, they are

by definition, as a consequence of their reification into a textual form, contingent, fluid and malleable. From this perspective, any meaningful exploration of any one of the three sets of standards that have been 'implemented' in the further education sector during the last sixteen years has to consider how the standards are distributed, where, when and by whom they are read, how they are talked about between and amongst people, and how they are championed or ignored. Questions such as these have to be considered before we can then move our analysis to a more abstract level and consider the wider discourses that the standards inhabit, the practices that they enfold and/or encourage, and so forth.

Gathering practitioners' perspectives

The data that is reported here was constructed through the use of an online survey, designed and administered using the Bristol Online Survey (BOS) tool. Details of the survey were circulated entirely online, via the UK FE Chat group (which convenes on Twitter using the hashtag #ukfechat). The respondents constitute a sample that is purposive, defined here as "a non-random sampling technique in which the researcher solicits persons with specific characteristics to participate in a research study" (Johnson and Christensen, 2008: 239). For the purpose of this research, the salient characteristics of the respondents are: people who currently work or used to work either full-time or part-time as a teacher or trainer in the further education sector (here taken to include community-based provision, adult education and work-based learning, but referred to throughout this article as 'the FE sector' simply for purposes of readability); and people who have gained or are working towards a teaching qualification (such as: Certificate in Education, PGCE, Certificate or Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector, City and Guilds Further and Adult Education teachers' Certificate). As the respondents constitute a numerically small sample (n=24 at the time of writing), any claims to wider statistical generalisability are rendered unsustainable. Instead, I argue that the discussion presented here garners a wider applicability, meaning and relevance through ideas of recognisability and extrapolation: that is, the idea that in qualitative research the recognisability of the phenomena being discussed implies that generalisability is not a problem and that the research instead should seek to establish the relevance of the account offered for that phenomenon and the ways in which the analysis relates to settings or contexts beyond the data that is presented (Alasuutari, 1995: 144-156).

The survey consisted of a series of closed and open questions that sought to gather participants' perspectives of professional standards in further education. Questions relating to length of service, employment status and professional qualifications allowed for a longitudinal element to the survey and for all three sets of standards, as well as concomitant changes in qualification structures, to be considered. The main body of questions in the survey addressed several key themes: how, where and when respondents read, responded to and/or worked with the standards at specific identifiable moments (during initial teacher training, and during mentoring or other instances of continuing professional development); and the extent to which the standards are present in the everyday, working habits and discourses of respondents. Respondents were asked to indicate using the scale provided (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, no opinion), the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements aligned to these themes. The thematic analysis (Silverman, 2005) of the responses to the open ended questions was *a priori* coded according to the themes thereby established through the closed questions, and these in turn form the first three themes that are used here to present the data and discuss the findings. These three

themes are: professional standards during initial teacher training; professional standards during mentoring and continuing professional development; and professional standards during everyday work and talk. A fourth *in vivo* code, practitioner responses to professional standards, was established during thematic analysis and in turn forms the fourth theme to be discussed below. Following a brief description of the respondents to the survey, each of these four themes will be discussed in turn.

The respondents: some biographical notes

At the time of writing, 24 full or part-time FE lecturers have provided responses to the survey. The majority (n=18) gained their professional qualifications (predominantly Certificate in Education or PGCE) after 2000 – that is, since the introduction of the first set of professional standards and the subsequent process of qualifications endorsement. Half of the respondents were members of the Institute for Learning (IfL) up to the time when the IfL ceased operations in October 2014, and 6 respondents are members of the Society for Education and Training (SET), which began operating in November 2014. The majority of respondents (n=16) are members of a trade union. Half of the respondents have worked in the sector for more than ten years. Half of the respondents work full-time, and eight are part-time. Three of the respondents work as teacher trainers – two in colleges, and one in a higher education institution. In the discussion that follows, data from the open questions is attributed pseudonymously, together with brief biographical data in order to contextualise the responses.

First theme: professional standards during initial teacher training

It is quite common for professional bodies to endorse specific qualifications that are designed to provide students with the required practical and/or theoretical competence and knowledge and experience, at a threshold level, to allow them entry to the profession in question. Through aligning professional curricula with professional standards, the qualifications in question can then be benchmarked in terms of delivery, performance and assessment, all in such a way as to meet the requirements of the relevant professional body (Katz, 2000; Taylor, 1997). It follows, then, that if a qualification such as a Certificate in Education or a Diploma in Teaching and Learning in the Lifelong Learning Sector has been endorsed by one of the three professional bodies that have since 1999 had purview of the sector (FENTO, LLUK or ETF), having been mapped onto the appropriate professional framework or set of standards, then aspects of those standards would be found embedded in the curriculum being followed – in the activities or assignments completed by the students, or in the resources that they use (Nasta, 2007; Tummons, 2014a).

The questionnaire data indicates that the majority of respondents are aware of not only the standards that were in place during their period of initial teacher training but also of subsequent iterations of the standards. All respondents either read standards online or downloaded them in pdf format to read offline at a later time. Half of respondents positioned themselves as learning about the professional standards from their initial teacher training. This might have included reading teacher-training textbooks, taking part in class-based activities that involved the standards, or writing assignments during their courses. Similarly, half of the

respondents indicated that they had been encouraged to use the professional standards in their teaching and their assignments during their initial teacher training.

Several respondents indicated that they had not been taught about or been encouraged to use the professional standards during their teaching. Almost half (n=10) disagreed or strongly disagreed that "during teacher training, I was encouraged to use the professional standards in my teaching" and also "…in my assignments", and more than half (n=13) disagreed or strongly disagreed that "during teacher training, we studied the professional standards in class". Taken together, these responses offer a thought-provoking contrast to the responses from the three lecturers who are involved with initial teacher training:

> I feel that the standards are very important in my role in developing teachers to be outstanding professionals.
>
> [Wendy, full-time FE lecturer, qualified since 2000]
>
> They have relevance to my trainees in ITT; less so for an experienced teacher.
>
> [James, part-time FE lecturer, qualified since 2005]
>
> FENTO and LLUK were far too many and too complex to easily refer to. The ETF ones are much more accessible. I promote them wherever possible as I feel, in the absence of mandatory teaching qualifications, they give teachers something to aspire to.
>
> [Kate, former FE lecturer now part-time HE lecturer, qualified since 1995]

Second theme: professional standards during mentoring and continuing professional development

Mentoring as a form of ongoing professional learning and development was foregrounded within the teacher-training curriculum for further education at the time of the publication of the LLUK standards. Following criticism of the FENTO standards by OFSTED for (amongst other things) failing to develop satisfactorily the subject-specialist pedagogies of trainee teachers (OFSTED, 2003), the LLUK standards positioned mentoring as the process through which subject-specialist pedagogic development might be embedded within a generic teacher-training qualification (Fisher and Webb, 2007). Mentoring quickly became established within teacher-training curricula for the sector. However, concerns were quickly raised that the provision of mentoring in further education should not be unproblematically assumed to be as straightforward to implement and evaluate as schools-based mentoring for newly qualified school teachers due to the considerable complexity of the FE sector (Hankey, 2004). Further concerns related to the extent to which mentoring might be implemented according to a judgemental as opposed to developmental model, due to the need to audit and evaluate the mentoring process (Ingleby and Tummons, 2012).

Alongside this foregrounding of mentoring by LLUK was an accompanying proposal that required teachers and trainers to undertake annual continuing professional development to be audited by the then newly-formed Institute for Learning (IfL), as a compulsory element of the then newly-established Qualified Teacher, Learning and Skills (QTLS) status (now under the purview of the ETF). Together with the contemporaneous decision to make teaching qualifications mandatory for all new entrants to the profession (a decision that has

since been reversed), these measures taken together can be seen as contributing to a process of professionalisation (Eraut, 1994) that sought, at the time, to establish parity between teachers in schools and teachers in colleges (Lucas and Nasta, 2010; Tedder and Lawy, 2009).

A third of respondents (n=8) reported that professional standards are in use at their colleges as part of a formal mentoring process: more specifically, two reported using them to reflect on their teaching practice with their mentor, whilst the three lecturers who are involved with teacher training (see above) all reported using professional standards with their mentees. A similar number (n=7) reported that professional standards were used in their colleges both in preparing for OFSTED inspections, and in preparing for internal teaching observations. Interestingly, one respondent indicated that, in her college, professional standards are also used as a focus for discussion in departmental meetings, going on to note that:

> I think it is very important to have professional standards in place. Teaching is a profession, whatever the sector. They [the standards] form a useful aspirational guide.

> [Stephanie, part-time FE lecturer, qualified since 2003]

However, more respondents indicated in their responses to the closed questions that professional standards were absent from formal structures for learning and development. Almost half (n=10) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that "the professional standards are used as part of the mentoring process at my college"; half disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "at my college, we make use of the professional standards in preparing for OFSTED inspections"; and almost two-thirds (n=15) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "we have staff training days at my college where we look at the professional standards". These responses to the closed questions were elaborated on further by some respondents in their answers to open questions:

> They [the standards] are very positive and reflect the sector. Colleges/employers, however, seem to have very little interest in them, which amazes me.

> [Meg, former FE lecturer, qualified since 2014]

> I found LLUK useful as a framework for my training. However, college managers don't seem to regard academic lecturing staff as professionals despite our professional training. The new ETF standards have suddenly appeared on the noticeboard but [there have been] no directives from above so far as to how they will be implemented or integrated into teacher CPD.

> [Sean, full-time FE lecturer, qualified since 2011]

Third theme: professional standards during everyday work and talk

If professional standards for FE teachers – or, indeed, for any profession – are to be seen as being worthwhile, authentic or meaningful, then it seems right to assume that they in some way reify, underpin and inform the everyday work done by members of the profession in question: this is one of the main reasons for establishing a series of professional standards (Eraut, 1994). That is to say, if we accept that the professional standards are in some way making a difference to or in some way changing the work being

done by college lecturers then we can expect to locate traces of these standards in their everyday work and talk. And we might in turn expect people to be able to identify and recognise instances of everyday work where professional standards are talked about or otherwise referred to, either with voices or with written words.

Mentoring (for some members of staff as well as for teacher-training students) and continuing professional development (mandatory for those teachers wishing to gain QTLS through the ETF) are two examples of everyday work, but these are both, arguably, supplementary to the main role of the teacher: to teach (mindful of the fact that the work done by FE teachers has intensified during the last twenty years and invariably also includes tutorial, pastoral and wider support roles (Avis and Bathmaker, 2004; Robson and Bailey, 2009)). Indeed, it can be argued that the way in which people become FE teachers – predominantly through a 'long interview' (Gleeson and James, 2007) and accredited through part-time in-service study rather than through full-time study followed by a probationary period – renders the everyday practice of teachers as being as important to their professional formation as is a FENTO/LLUK/ETF-endorsed certificate or diploma. So the question is: to what extent do the professional standards make themselves felt in the everyday, routinised work of teachers and trainers? Do people talk about them, refer to them or otherwise either make use of them or see them being used?

A minority of respondents (n=6) indicated in their responses to the closed survey questions that the professional standards have been a topic of conversation, either with teaching colleagues or with senior managers, within their colleges. A smaller number (n=3) indicated that such conversations took place during departmental or team meetings. A slightly greater proportion of respondents indicated that they used professional standards as a tool or focus for their own reflective practice: sometimes as part of a mentoring process (discussed above), but more widely in their everyday teaching practice, with over half (n=13) of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that "I use the professional standards when reflecting on my own teaching practice". Over half of respondents (n=15) agreed or strongly agreed that the standards "make a real difference to me in my role as a trainer/teacher", and a slightly lower number (n=14) agreed or strongly agreed that "knowing about the professional standards helps me to become a better teacher/trainer in the workshop/classroom". However, just under half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "the professional standards do not make any difference to the day-to-day job of being a teacher/trainer in FE". These differences in attitude were reflected in respondents' open comments:

> The current standards are much more focussed and enable me to refer to them easily.
>
> [Kate, former FE lecturer now part-time HE lecturer, qualified since 1995]
>
> They feel vague and detached from my everyday teaching. When you read the new ones, you can't disagree with them, but they seem lofty and not dealing with the realities of teaching. Learning and learners also seem absent from the standards.
>
> [Dennis, part-time FE lecturer, qualified since 2009]
>
> I don't feel that the professional standards are 'visible' or conscious components of teacher practice. The published ones are often confusing. Teachers may prefer to rely on their instinct and intuition to guide them in their own professional approaches.

Fourth theme: practitioner responses to professional standards

For professional standards to take root, to accomplish - either in part or in whole – the project of professionalisation that FENTO, LLUK and ETF have in turn attempted (Lucas and Nasta, 2010), then it follows that teachers and trainers in the sector also need to be enrolled within the process. The standards have to be persuasive, and to be championed by people who find them so, to convince the people to whom they are addressed that they have some kind of utility and/or value (Tummons, 2014a). Some of the addressees fall outside the scope of the data being discussed here: professional standards are not written solely for members of that profession, but also for members of the public who want or need to be informed about the specialist competence and/or knowledge of that profession, and for those people an/or institutions who are responsible for the evaluation or inspection of the performance of members of the profession (Eraut, 1994; Katz, 2000). Here, it is the attitudes of teachers and trainers that are of relevance: it is their professional practice, their work, that is being described and shaped by the standards, and it is their professionalism that is being defined.

The first issue to emerge from considering the responses to the open questions in the survey is the clear recognition of the importance and utility of professional standards. More specifically, the notion of having standards has been accepted and there is a degree of positivity expressed when comparing the new ETF standards to the older LLUK standards:

> The new [ETF] standards are a real improvement on the old ones with their emphasis on creativity, innovation and collaboration. […] [They] provide a framework for professional discussions, qualifications, and as a point of reference for teachers and trainers.
>
> [Sally, part-time FE lecturer, qualified since 2002]
>
> [The] new standards [are] much more accessible and pragmatic than LLUK […] which were repetitive and unwieldy.
>
> [Lesley, retired HE in FE lecturer, qualified since 1977]

However, this broadly positive response is in some cases somewhat qualified. Other respondents endorse professional standards, but with some caveats. For one respondent, the usefulness of the new standards is rendered problematic by the way in which they have been written:

> I found the LLUK professional standards quite useful in terms of mentoring trainee teachers since it gave them a specific list to identify key skills. […] [The ETF standards] are useful for reflection, but on a wider remit than everyday as they are too aspirational so need interpreting correctly for everyday use.
>
> [Blake, full-time FE lecturer, qualified since 1988]

And for another respondent, questions about the ways in which the ETF standards should be interpreted are accompanied by a sense that the standards have been imposed rather than consulted on:

> Professional standards are vitally important. In order to make them more relevant to practitioners, however, I feel that policy makers need to consult more closely with teachers about professional standards, make professional standards clearer and easier to absorb and understand and simplify the process by which professional standards are communicated.
>
> [Carl, part-time variable hours FE lecturer, qualified since 2008]

For both of these respondents, therefore, concerns over what the standards actually mean remain – a concern that was previously voiced in relation to both the FENTO and LLUK standards. And for a third respondent, the new ETF standards suffer from another of the factors criticised in relation to both the FENTO and the LLUK frameworks, namely focussing too closely on 'mainstream' FE and ignoring the wider learning and skills sector.

> [They are] not very useful – relevant mostly for general further education/adult and community learning. [They] need to take better account of work-based learning. [The] standards need to be more relevant to ALL [emphasis in the original] providers and need to be referenced more clearly in OFSTED if they're to have an impact.
>
> [Joyce, full-time FE lecturer, qualified since 2009]

Discussion: what are the professional standards doing?

In the first article derived from this research, I argued against a focus on the discourses that might be seen as underpinning professional standards in the sector, suggesting instead that we, as researchers and as practitioners, ought to concentrate more on the actual acts of distributing and reading the standards as much as on making meaning from them, if we are to establish what professional standards have actually accomplished within the sector since the first iteration, the FENTO standards, was published sixteen years ago (Tummons, 2014a). I suggested that any problematisation of professional standards must take into account the materiality of the standards as text: put simply, if people don't read them and then make meaning from them, then how can they promulgate any particular process of professionalisation?

In a subsequent article, I shifted to a specific site of reading and meaning making: textbooks (Tummons, 2014b). I argued that if we use teacher-training textbooks as a proxy for the teacher-training curriculum for the sector, the professional standards would appear to have made only a minor impact on curriculum content. A thematic analysis of multiple editions of widely-read teacher-training textbooks for FE teacher training indicated only minor changes to the curriculum, changes derived from all kinds of wider developments – such as developments in information and communications technology or changes in assessment design by awarding bodies – but not from professional standards, which invariably were applied to the existing curriculum rather than used to shape it.

The survey data that I have presented here can be seen as adding to the debates that have already been established in the research literature in two domains, and which have been liberally cited in this paper: firstly, in relation to the implementation of the FENTO and LLUK standards; and secondly in relation to professionalism and professionalisation in the sector. Put simply, the first two sets of standards were superseded because they were not deemed to be fit for purpose: they were cumbersome, they were prone to multiple interpretations, they by no means satisfactorily represented the complex bodies of knowledge and practice that characterise the work of teachers in the sector, and they failed to establish a serious ethos of professionalism. The variations in practitioner responses to the third set of standards – the ETF framework – that are presented in this paper would indicate that professionalisation within the FE sector remains a precarious social project at best.

It would appear to be the case that the extent to which professional standards have come to be known about, talked or written about and used within the sector during the last fifteen years as been variable at best and continues to be so. Although most of the respondents who make up this purposive sample of teachers and trainers in further education are aware of the current – and where length of service is a factor, the previous – professional standards, for at least half of them the standards have been absent from teacher training, and in more cases are absent from mentoring, from formal professional development, and from conversations with teaching colleagues and managers. A majority of respondents stated that the standards were a useful focus for their teaching in the workshop or classroom and for their reflective practice, but for almost half the standards are not seen as making any difference to their daily working lives. And finally, some people find the current standards clearer to read than was the case with previous iterations; for others, the standards – as a text – remain confusing, difficult to follow and lacking applicability.

Conclusion: do standards matter?

Significant resources have been employed during the last twenty years or so in establishing three (so far) distinct iterations of professional standards for teachers in the further education sector, but the extent to which any serious process of professionalisation has been accomplished through these standards is difficult to ascertain. Working cultures have not improved. Professional qualifications remain variable as well as (once again) voluntary. Inspection and audit cultures continue to be imposed on the sector. The standards – all three iterations – lack straightforward or incontestable meaning.

But it is perhaps unfair to state that professionalisation has stumbled (at best) due to any inherent qualities of the distinct sets of professional standards that have been created. Arguably, any set of standards, no matter how well written, cannot bring about (re)professionalisation in the sector if they lack a sufficient number of people to champion them (Law, 1994), or if they are located within a wider political climate that can safely marginalise – or even ignore – them. If policy makers continue simultaneously to marginalise the sector through the withdrawal of financial and political capital and discombobulate the sector through constant changes in funding mechanisms and regulatory systems (Bailey and Unwin, 2014), then what hope does any set of imposed, top-down standards have of accomplishing professionalisation? Of course it is to be commended that for some practitioners (and the voices of some of these are present in this article) professional standards lead to discussion, to debate, to reflection on practice. But for others, they simply

represent another box to be ticked as part of a teacher-training assignment, another set of papers that don't really apply to them, more regulations that don't really make sense or that are just going to be used as a checklist during inspection week – reflecting the fact that, like any document that is designed to be read, the standards can and will be interpreted differently by different people or groups of people. As a case in point, the ways in which the three teacher-trainers who are represented in the data (James, Kate, and Wendy) construct their understanding and use of subsequent iterations of professional standards is at odds with the other respondents. For these teacher trainers, professional standards would appear to serve as providing a conduit for policy discourses around teaching and learning in FE at both national as well as institutional level.

Simply waiting for the ETF standards to dwindle into insignificance through (more or less benign) neglect is one possible future, but there is perhaps a more meaningful way forward in terms of professionalisation within FE. And that way forward is not to spend time and resource in producing yet more standards, or indeed to expend any further effort in persuading practitioners to embrace the current standards as a tool for professional emancipation. Rather, any serious conversation about professionalisation needs to focus not on what an employer-led body thinks that practitioners need, but on what practitioners themselves have to say on the subject. Practitioners need to counter the dominant discourses that have surrounded professionalisation during the last two decades and more. It might be the case that practitioners are just waiting for the 'right' set of standards to embrace and rally round. But it might also be the case that a standards-based approach, and hence the 'standards discourse' (Clarke and Moore, 2013) that enfolds and justifies such an approach, is fundamentally flawed because the standards themselves are fundamentally flawed, incapable of reconciling the conflicting demands – of embodying professional knowledge, of reifying measures of accountability, of framing professional qualifications – that are made of them.

Notes on contributor

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Appendix

Summary lists of research respondents. Respondents working in Initial teacher Education [ITE] are identified.

List 1: respondents named in the article (n=12)

Blake, full-time FE lecturer, qualified 1988

Carl, part-time variable hours FE lecturer, qualified 2008

Dennis, part-time FE lecturer, qualified 2009

James, part-time FE lecturer, qualified 2005 [ITE]

Joyce, full-time FE lecturer, qualified 2009

Kate, former FE now part-time HE lecturer, qualified 1995 [ITE]

Lesley, retired HE in FE lecturer, qualified 1977

Meg, former FE lecturer, qualified 2014

Sally, part-time FE lecturer, qualified 2002

Sean, full-time FE lecturer, qualified 2011

Stephanie, part-time FE lecturer, qualified 2003

Wendy, full-time FE lecturer, qualified 2000 [ITE]

List 2: other respondents (n=12)

1. Full-time FE lecturer, qualified 2011
2. Full-time FE lecturer, qualified 2010
3. Part-time FE lecturer, qualified 2009
4. Full-time FE lecturer, qualified 2006
5. Part-time FE lecturer, qualified 2005
6. Full-time FE lecturer, qualified 2003
7. Full-time FE lecturer, qualified 2003
8. Part-time FE lecturer, qualified 2003
9. Part-time FE lecturer, qualified 2002
10. Full-time FE lecturer, qualified 1985
11. Full-time FE lecturer, former part-time Ofsted Inspector, qualified 1979
12. Former FE lecturer now full-time HE lecturer, no date given for teaching qualification