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Performativity and professional development: the gap between policy and practice in the English Further Education system

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Abstract

The New Labour government identified the Further Education (FE) sector as a vehicle to deliver its central policies on social justice and economic competitiveness in England, which has led to a torrent of initiatives that have increased central scrutiny and control over FE. Although the connections between social justice, economic competitiveness and education are hegemonic in mainstream British politics, they are unfounded. Therefore, FE can only fail to fully deliver the government's central programme. Thus a gap exists between policy initiatives and practice in colleges even, paradoxically, where reforms are ostensibly successful. In order to illustrate this gap and how it is maintained this paper considers one specific reform: the statutory obligation for teachers in English FE colleges to annually undertake thirty hours of continuing professional development (CPD). Evidence from small-scale exploratory research suggests that this initiative has had little impact on patterns of CPD, though the government's quantifiable targets are being systematically met. This paper argues that a symbiosis of performativity has evolved where the government produces targets and colleges produce mechanisms to "evidence" their achievement, separate to any change in practice and thus maintaining the gap between policy and practice.

Introduction

> Whatever else you could say about Labour's educational policies there is certainly no shortage of them.

<div align="right">(Ball 2008, 86)</div>

Over three million learners (Foster 2005, vi) attend English FE colleges which are part of a heterogeneous sector which has been described as what is not school and not university (Kennedy 1997, 1), though even those boundaries are becoming less defined. It remains the sector where the majority of vocational training and adult education take place, as well as academic study between the ages of 16 and 18. The New Labour government, elected in 1997, identified FE as a means to deliver two central policies in England: social justice through widening participation in education and enhancing national economic competitiveness through improving the workforce's skills (Orr 2008). Therefore, while previous governments largely neglected FE (Lucas 2004, 35), New Labour has increasingly scrutinised and controlled colleges and staff; a process which is apparent in the government's *Workforce Strategy for the Further Education System in England, 2007-2012* (LLUK 2008a). This strategy includes the introduction of a statutory annual period of continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers in FE colleges, on which this paper focuses. From September 2007 each teacher must carry out and record thirty hours of CPD each year in order to maintain their licence to practise (IfL 2009, 14).

Finlay *et al*. (2007, 138) describe *policy* as a "loose term" which includes:

> value commitments, strategic objectives and operational instruments and
> structures at national, regional, local and institutional levels.

Such a catholic understanding of policy is necessary within FE where there is a plethora of national and local agencies, bodies, and institutions. As part of their wide-ranging and detailed research into the impact of policy in the learning and skills sector in England Coffield *et al* (2008, 15-17) created an organigram of the sector which they describe as looking "more like the chart of the internal wiring of an advanced computer than the outline of a 'streamlined', coherent sector." This complexity has arisen partly because of the diversity of the sector and its conflicting constituencies (Coffield *et al* 2007, 735), but also because policy has been laid on policy, and for New Labour that has meant organisation laid upon organisation. So, CPD in FE over the past decade has been under the direction of five different government departments and at least five different government-funded agencies. Besides these is the nominally independent professional body for teaching staff in FE, the Institute for Learning (IfL), whose website (IfL 2008) helpfully contains 250 acronyms used in the sector. Note, though, that IfL "do not expect [this list] to be comprehensive". Such complexity itself becomes an important factor in the implementation of any policy initiative.

Using definitions developed by Steer *et al* (2007: 177) policy drivers are the broadly described aims while a policy lever, is "shorthand for the wide array of functional

mechanisms through which government and its agencies seek to implement policies". The use of targets for FE colleges is one such policy lever. In order to demonstrate how policy levers become detached from the changes they are meant to force, I consider the targets related to the CPD reform. This reform demonstrates three aspects of the government's approach to FE. Firstly, efforts to closely direct the sector have had the effect of reducing professional autonomy and trust by increasing centralised accountability. Secondly, the means to measure the initiative's success have diverged from the intended change in colleges as systems to record the achievement of targets are introduced and prioritised. Finally, despite its ostensible success through achievement of targets, the initiative has changed little in practice.

This paper draws on small-scale qualitative research into the introduction of compulsory CPD to demonstrate how a symbiosis of performativity has evolved from government reforms, which indicates how the gap between national initiatives and local practice is perpetuated. Questionnaires were submitted to forty-two human resources managers, teacher-trainers and others who identified themselves as having responsibility for staff development and CPD at FE organisations in the north of England in October 2008. This was just over a year after the introduction of the CPD initiative. Twenty-nine completed questionnaires were returned from staff at twenty-one organisations. These questionnaires sought their attitudes towards compulsory CPD and descriptions of how their organisations were implementing the reform. Participants were specifically asked to describe how their organisation was demonstrating achievement of the government's targets relating to CPD. This research provides a snapshot picture of the early trajectory of the CPD reform, which

suggests how national policy can be distorted by local implementation and by the need to demonstrate achievement of targets. Before discussing the findings from these local FE organisations in more detail, I consider the development of national policy for FE which has shaped how those organisations responded to the CPD reform.

Further Education Policy under New Labour

Tomlinson (2001, 112) stressed the "continuities and similarities" between the approaches to post-16 education of the Conservative and New Labour governments, but the new government recognised the need for reform in the 1999 White Paper, *Learning to Succeed: a new framework for post-16 learning*:

> There is too much duplication, confusion and bureaucracy in the current system. Too little money actually reaches learners and employers, too much is tied up in bureaucracy. There is an absence of effective co-ordination or strategic planning. The system has insufficient focus on skill and employer needs at national, regional and local levels.
>
> (DfEE 1999, 21)

Apparently, FE was broken and needed fixing before it could carry New Labour's policies, which led to the current government spending more time and effort on the sector than any previous one. In 2004 Lucas (2004, 35) wrote:

It is probably true that in the last five years or so there has been more regulation and government policy concerned with raising the standards of teaching in further education than ever before.

The same statement could be made about the five years that followed for reasons that lie at the heart of the New Labour project. Hall (2003, 6) accused New Labour of speaking "with forked tongue" by rhetorically combining economic neo-liberalism with their more social-democratic strand. However, for New Labour the connections between education and training, economic growth and social justice are simply unquestionable. These connections, considered more fully below, are rhetorically positioned to be unassailable and so broach no argument nor require any evidence because there is, apparently, no alternative. Smith (1994, 37 in Avis 2003, 317) describes the process of hegemony, which can be related to educational policy in this area.

A hegemonic project does not dominate political subjects: it does not reduce political subjects to pure obedience and it does not even require their unequivocal support for its specific demands. It pursues, instead, a far more subtle goal, namely the vision of the social order as the social order itself.

To describe a political project as hegemonic, then, is not to say that a majority of the electorate explicitly supports its policies, but to say that there appears to be no other alternative to this project's vision of society.

The orthodoxy that makes education an aspect of economic policy is part of what Ball (1999: 204 original italics) has called a "powerful, coherent *policyscape*" where social justice is aligned with economic competitiveness, as apparent in New Labour's statements. David Blunkett, the first New Labour Secretary of State for Education, wrote in the forward to the government Green Paper in 1998:

> Learning is the key to prosperity - for each of us as individuals, as well as for the nation as a whole. Investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twenty-first century. This is why the Government has put learning at the heart of its ambition.
>
> (DfEE 1998,1)

Seven years later in 2005 Bill Rammell, then British minister of state for Higher Education and Lifelong Learning claimed (LSC 2005, 1), "Further Education is the engine room for skills and social justice in this country", and he was amongst ministers who welcomed the Leitch Review of Skills published in 2006 which asserted, "where skills were once **a** key driver of prosperity and fairness, they are now **the** key driver" (Leitch 2006, 46, original emphases). That same year Prime Minister Tony Blair wrote in the forward to a Government White Paper:

> Our economic future depends on our productivity as a nation. That requires a labour force with skills to match the best in the world. […]

The colleges and training providers that make up the Further Education sector are central to achieving that ambition. […] But at present, Further Education is not achieving its full potential as the powerhouse of a high skills economy.

(DfES 2006)

This extract indicates the continued importance to the government of the economic role of FE, though exactly what "high skills" are is not specified, and it indicates that ministers still considered FE not to be working properly. The perceived failure of FE to achieve "its full potential" led to increasing the centralised accountability of FE teachers, which Morris (2001, 26) celebrated in relation to school-teachers in a speech made while she was Minister of Education.

We do now have an accountable profession. Performance tables, the inspection system, performance management, examination and assessment arrangements, procedures for tackling school weaknesses, all contribute to the effective accountability of teachers and headteachers.

The Workforce Strategy for the Further Education System in England, 2007-2012, which includes mandatory annual CPD, can be understood within this context of perceived failure leading to increased accountability. One important element of this strategy is the *New overarching professional standards for teachers, tutors and trainers in the lifelong learning sector* which contain 190 statements of the "skills, knowledge and attributes" (LLUK 2006, ii) required by those who work in the sector, including (p4) a commitment to: "[u]sing a range of learning resources to support

learners"; and (p5) the requirement to "[s]tructure and present information clearly and effectively". The length of these standards and their banal specification of practice contrast unfavourably with the equivalent documents covering the schools and HE sectors which briefly set out broad professional values and do not attempt to prescribe classroom activities (Orr 2008, 103). The content and tenor of the documents that relate to FE suggest what Avis (2003, 315) termed "a truncated model of trust", but why do policy-makers treat FE in such a manner? Certainly this most heterogeneous sector is important to the government, as I have argued, yet Coffield *et al* (2008, 4) argue that those with authority fail to understand the sector because, "with a few exceptions, neither they nor their children have ever passed through it." For the same reason the FE sector does not have the lobbying strength of schools and universities and so is more susceptible to the activities of new ministers wishing to make their own mark. Nonetheless, while legislation has rained down upon FE there is a gap between what may be planned by government reform and what it achieves in practice as one initiative demands another to achieve what the former failed to. This pattern results from the government's ideological investment in the links between education and training, social justice and economic competitiveness.

Despite its hegemony in mainstream British politics, this conjoining of educational, economic and social policy has been subject to excoriating criticism from, amongst others, Coffield (1999), Rikowski (2001) and Avis (2007), who have found that the orthodoxy has no foundation in evidence. Reporting on a recent major research project into education, globalisation and the knowledge economy, Brown *et al* (2008,

17) found that "while the skills of the workforce remain important, they are not a source of decisive competitive advantage." Moreover, they found that the expansion of access to Higher Education (HE) in the UK "has failed to narrow income inequalities even amongst university graduates". Therefore, the government is subjecting FE to ever-greater scrutiny and accountability for what cannot be accomplished through education and training alone. There is a fundamental discrepancy between the government's intention for FE and what FE can achieve, no matter how efficient the sector is. The White Paper in which Blair wrote the forward quoted above was also the document that first introduced compulsory CPD for all staff in FE; another means to fix a broken FE sector.

CPD and workforce strategy

The shift from voluntary to compulsory CPD in FE is only the most prominent aspect of *The Workforce Strategy* which:

> is intended to help shape the further education workforce of the future in
> England. By providing a national framework, it is intended to support all
> colleges and learning providers implement their own local workforce plans to
> support the delivery of excellent provision for young people, adults and
> employers.

(LLUK 2008a, 6)

The government minister Bill Rammell (LLUK 2008a: 4) praised the progress of staff in FE in his forward to the initiative before warning that given current and future

developments: "All those who lead and work in the sector will need to move up a gear." David Hunter, chief executive of LLUK wrote in his forward (LLUK 2008a, 5):

> There is already much success to celebrate and the Further Education Sector workforce can be rightly proud of its achievements to date. But more still is necessary.

Part of this 'gear change' or 'necessary more' is the annual thirty hours of CPD, but like democracy and the pursuit of happiness, professional development is universally celebrated as something good, with little analysis of what it entails. Trorey (2002, 2; her emphasis) distinguishes between *"institutional development"* aimed at improving a whole organisation, often described as *"staff development"* and the more individual *"professional development"* involving "pedagogic knowledge and subject expertise". There is a difference in their primary instigation and CPD is normally under the control of the professional.

The voluminous *National Standards for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Further Education in England and Wales* were published by FENTO in 1999 as a statutory basis for teacher training qualifications in England and they included a commitment to "engage in continuing professional development" (FENTO 1999, 23). Although significant within the initial training of teachers in FE, the so-called FENTO standards had little influence on practice (Nasta 2007). Three years later in 2002 the government published *Success For All: Reforming Further Education and Training— our vision for the future* which sought to put "teaching, training and learning at the

heart of what we do" (DfES 2002, 5). This highlighted CPD as a priority area because, in an astonishingly candid admission (DfES 2002, 4), "insufficient attention [had] been given to improving teaching, training and learning". It was therefore the aim of the government to:

> address under-investment in professionalism and to reward and recognise the importance of the further education and training workforce. (p5)

As a part of the *Success For All* programme the DfES published *Equipping Our Teachers for the Future* (2004), which spawned the new statutory period of CPD and a corresponding rise in control and scrutiny. Crucially, teachers in FE now need to record their annual CPD in order to achieve and maintain the status of "Qualified Teacher in Learning and Skills" (QTLS), which is their licence to practise. These workforce reforms were introduced and positioned to be indisputably positive. Mandatory CPD was about "updating knowledge of the subject taught and developing teaching skills" of individual teachers (DIUS 2007, 1). However, LLUK's (2008b, 14) research on CPD in the sector found a discrepancy in views between teachers and managers suggesting this stress on individual teachers entails responsibility without control. Their data indicated 59% of teachers strongly agreed that lack of time was a barrier to "accessing CPD opportunities", against only 25% of senior managers. Likewise, 33% of teachers strongly agreed that cost was a barrier, against 11% of senior managers. Managers may be blaming teachers for lack of professional development while ignoring other structural obstacles. Moreover, the same research (p15) found that even what influence teachers have over their CPD

was weak and that CPD is melding with staff development instigated by the organisation (p10). Institutional control of CPD is encouraged by one of the anticipated outcomes in the government's *Workforce Strategy Implementation Plan* (LLUK 2008e, 10):

> A culture of CPD is established within the Further Education sector focused on meeting learner needs at provider and individual level. Colleges and learning providers approach their own staff development in similar and flexible ways, as they would for a learner, employer or client. The confidence and capacity of the workforce in understanding and using technology to transform education and training will be a key element of this culture.

Here, CPD and staff development become interchangeable, predominantly about the needs of the organisation and beyond the control of the individual. Moreover, in the guidance to staff entering FE from other education sectors quoted above, LLUK explicitly recommends CPD as a means of coping with FE's vicissitudes.

> If you previously taught in the schools sector, you might have assumed you had chosen a lifetime's career. For teachers in FE, the fluidity, complexity and rapidly changing priorities mean that continuity is much more uncertain. One crucial way that practitioners in FE can deal with this uncertainty is to be proactive about their professional development.
>
> (2008c, 6)

This is some distance from the stated purpose of "updating knowledge of the subject taught and developing teaching skills". Moreover, mandatory professional development suffers from appearing as yet another initiative, and even the government recognises the sheer amount of policy as an impediment to achieving progress in FE. The DIUS business plan for 2008-2009 includes eight strategic messages; fifteen "key policy deliverables"; two public service agreements; and six Departmental Strategy Objectives. Little wonder then, that one of the department's "top seven corporate risks" is:

> Sector instability and Reform Overload in FE – that the key delivery partners become distracted from delivering "business as usual" due to uncertainty over the future organisational shape of the sector, or as a result of the sheer scale of change
>
> (DIUS 2008, 6)

By the government's own admission the quantity of reforms makes them less likely to succeed, which may lead to the need for more reforms. This dubious logic is a feature of the gap between policy and practice.

What impact has compulsory CPD had?
Having described the policy context I now turn to the functioning of the CPD reform. The implementation plan for the workforce strategy (LLUK 2008e, 5) states that "milestones and outcomes should be measurable" but LLUK (2008b, 4) are aware of

the difficulty of assessing what effect CPD has had on the sector and the "urgent need to develop more precise instruments for impact management."

The ambiguity of "impact measurement" is evident in anticipated outcome 3.2 in the implementation plan for the FE workforce strategy (LLUK 2008e: 10):

> A workforce that provides the impetus for its own learning needs by taking action towards individual skills development. This outcome will be demonstrated by the enthusiasm of staff about the new CPD opportunities available and their keenness to adopt new technologies and engage in the latest training.

Yet, quantifying enthusiasm or keenness is difficult and so quantitative targets take precedence; employers had to ensure that each teacher in FE was registered with IfL by September 2008 and that he or she records thirty hours of CPD each year (LLUK 2008e: 6). Though these targets were designed as a lever for policy and to assess the change that policy had made, the small-scale exploratory research described at the beginning of this paper suggests that they have already "become an end in themselves" (Steer *et al* 2007, 177). The responses to questionnaires from the twenty-nine staff with responsibility for CPD and staff development at twenty one FE organisations suggest how a reform can achieve little of what it was designed for, in this case increased participation in CPD, but still apparently succeed.

Although many respondents acknowledged that the CPD initiative was still relatively

new, none indicated that it had made a significant difference to practice in institutions over twelve months after its introduction, though it had been experienced in managerialist accountability. However, the limitations of managerialism are also apparent in this data. One respondent to the research reflected this by writing about the "*ethos of counting hours rather than IMPACT*" (original capitalisation), another identified the problem as being:

> *that the actual purpose of CPD seems to be lost and the amount of CPD completed is the most important issue i.e. 'tick box mentality'*

Several others used this motif of "ticking boxes" to describe the effect of compulsory CPD in organisations, while another described how CPD was viewed as *"jumping through hoops"* because of the need to maintain QTLS. Nevertheless, the government's goal of a culture of CPD was widely supported. The perceived barriers to the creation of this culture were mainly structural, above all, time pressures on already full workloads. Moreover, thirteen identified what might be summarised as obstacles relating to the existing culture in colleges, which had not hitherto promoted CPD. One respondent used the term "*entrenched attitudes*". Nonetheless, there were many instances of organisations genuinely attempting to develop the professional practice of their staff; one college had produced pamphlets on good practice for teachers; one had produced guides to teaching resources; and another had increased the number of staff supported on HE qualifications. Furthermore, organisations were running mandatory training days to make up some proportion of the thirty hours and others were producing on-line CPD materials. However, the

instigation for these activities came largely from the organisation rather than the individual, and almost all had been in place prior to the new CPD initiative. One respondent described the situation at an FE college:

> Still very much a staff development approach with compulsory sessions that ensure staff can use college systems and are familiar of (sic) policies, rather than meaningful CPD.

Similarly, a college elsewhere had issued all staff with a substantial portfolio to facilitate reflection on and recording of CPD prior to the introduction of mandatory CPD, but had provided "***no** introduction, **no** guidelines, **no** follow up*" (original emphases).

Also apparent was the high level of management preparation to ensure recording of the thirty hours of CPD and membership of IfL. Respondents from all but two of the twenty-one organisations could describe the systems in place to achieve the government's "headline actions" (LLUK 2008e). One college had a "master spreadsheet"; others used databases; and others had "frameworks" in place. Respondents described mechanisms of compliance to verify achievement of targets systematically and quantitatively, even where there had been little new engagement in CPD. This is not deception; the targets have been achieved because college managers working within an audit culture have become adept at creating systems to "evidence" target achievement. The symbiotic nature of the relationship between targets and systems suggests a mutually dependent ecology of performance

indicators and systems to indicate performance. Thus performativity flourishes separate from professional practice.

Writing about English FE in the 1990s Gleeson and Shain (1999, 482) described 'strategic compliance' as "a form of artful pragmatism reconciling professional and managerial interests", which they identified amongst managers and teachers in FE who were coping with rapid change. Strategic compliers retained a commitment to traditional professional and educational values but partially agreed to reforms in line with senior college management to create space for manoeuvre and so defend what they valued in their practice. Strategic compliers "did not comply for the 'sake of their own skins'" (p460) but made decisions to conform or resist based upon the needs of their learners. Whether such space exists in FE today is moot, but this does not explain the institutional response to the CPD initiative because the compliance here is expedient not strategic. In other words, the mechanisms of compliance are pragmatic, but are not part of a strategy to defend educational values.

Colleges contend for government funding and managers must be seen to achieve targets because their institution depends on finance directly related to those targets. In this artificial market only financial messages are credible and this has created a democratic deficit where those affected by policy have little influence over it. Since college managers have little control over policy implementation and since the government's vision for FE appears unachievable, they will tell the government the 'truth', targets have been achieved; but not the whole 'truth', those targets do not reflect changed practice.

This picture of the early implementation of the CPD initiative illustrates the limitations of top-down, outcomes-led policymaking. It demonstrates how an initiative can appear successful without achieving the intended change in practice because colleges can report performance indicators have been met, even where few staff have heard of the reform. While the government's policy levers become apparently more numerous and rigorous, they are not as powerful as the government's rhetoric might suggest. The gap between policy and practice remains.

Conclusion

New Labour has invested more in FE in England than any previous government because they identified the sector as a vehicle to deliver their core policies of global competitiveness through a high-skills workforce and social justice through widening participation in education. The links between national economic competitiveness, social justice and education are currently hegemonic and central to New Labour orthodoxy, but these links remain unfounded and consequently FE can only fail to achieve the government's central goals. This failure has led to closer scrutiny and control of the sector and to so many policy initiatives that "reform overload" is a risk even recognised by the government. Paradoxically those same initiatives may be reported as successful, even where little has changed. The trajectory of policy for CPD from voluntarism to statutory compulsion uncovers one instance of this process in action. In a symbiotic response to the government's requirement to measure impact through numerical targets, college managers have pragmatically constructed systems to report achievement of the numerical targets attached to CPD, despite

insignificant alteration in patterns of practice. This symbiotic response derives from the unequal and undemocratic relationship between colleges and the government. This situation can only be ameliorated when those working and studying in colleges have more control over setting their own collective priorities, including CPD, in a rational rather than a performative manner.

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