Chapter 6. Policy into practice: provider perspectives

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Introduction

Building on the fourth seminar in the New Directions series, this chapter presents an account of the consequences of policy processes and structures for providers, at the level of colleges. The fundamental question here is whether (and if so to what extent) the sorts of differences that are discussed elsewhere in the book actually impact on practices. Do contrasting directions in policy leave practices largely untouched? Do people carry on teaching and learning in the same old (or new) ways regardless of policy direction and emphasis? Although the seminar series did not include a thoroughgoing research design that would provide a definitive answer to such questions, it nevertheless allowed for some well-founded discussion. The chapter draws on three sources: firstly, on the contributions of seminar series participants, and in particular three senior college leaders based in England, Scotland and Wales respectively; secondly, on subsequent interviews with four senior college leaders also from across those three countries; thirdly, on the recent Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) project Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education, the only large-scale independent study of teaching and learning in the FE sector in the UK. This project was chosen because, although it was based only in England, it did investigate the relationship between policy and practice, and it offered an approach in which the ‘presence’ of policy and the outcomes of policy were rendered visible in everyday practices.
The chapter begins with a brief mention of some difficulties of making comparisons between the three countries. It then introduces some key points of similarity and difference in the relationship between colleges and policy processes in England, Scotland and Wales, with a particular focus on: contexts for collaboration; mission, voice and connectedness; and relationships to quality regimes. The discussion of the potential significance of these similarities and differences is taken forward via the concept of learning culture, because this suggests how elements of policy can never be safely relegated to ‘mere context’, but have to be understood for their impact on practices on the ground.

**A difficult context for comparison**

It would be a demanding enough task to compare experiences of policy development, implementation and consequences in three countries, even if the focus was narrowly upon ‘policy affecting colleges of further education’. What complicates a comparison of England, Scotland and Wales is that they cannot be considered as separate entities. One must not only keep in the mind the shifting differences and overlaps in remit and statutory responsibility of Westminster, Edinburgh and Cardiff; but also the problem of a cultural tendency which often sees commentary on ‘Britain’ or ‘the UK’ giving enormous weight to English examples and where the position of Scotland and Wales is left ambiguous.

Let us begin with two recent examples of high-level policy ambition:

Moving from good to great public services can only be achieved by Whitehall letting go and empowering staff to shape local provision to meet local needs and priorities.

Gordon Brown, 2009
Our plans for decentralisation are based on a simple human insight: if you give people more responsibility, they behave more responsibly…

and

We will require the people and organisations acting for the state to be directly accountable to the people they are supposed to serve. They will have to stop treating them like children and start treating them like adults.

David Cameron, 2009

It can be safely assumed that both these statements were intended (and were largely taken) to pertain to ‘Britain’. Yet in the case of further education at least, the problem they are aimed at tackling is much more of an English one than it is a Welsh or Scottish one. A college Principal in England summed up the situation as follows:

Increasingly the context is one of a top-down, planning-led environment in which quangos determine not just the amount of money but precisely what qualifications and client groups are served and how much. It is a Kafkaesque scenario that would be unbelievable to most people outside FE. There are funding manuals, and books to interpret the funding manuals, lots of top down bureaucracy, armies of people employed to make sure you are complying with a particular interpretation of the rules.

Principal of a large FE college in England, May 2010

He went on to state that English FE has been a ‘test bed’ for a particularly rabid form of performativity, a point others have made a number of times (e.g. Hayes, 2003; Gleeson et al; 2005, Coffield et al., 2008) and further echoed in a series of recent studies exploring the ramifications of greater self-regulation (‘SR’) in the Learning and Skills Sector:

...respondents in the different sectors expressed similar concerns that their views were not being taken into account within current policy debates about SR. FE college
Principals were frustrated that they were not included in these debates, and so too were many respondents in private training providers and in the adult and community learning sector

Collinson, 2009: 1

There is a notable irony here, given that the topic was a form of autonomy. In one of the component reports exploring the voice of college leaders, the authors describe a ‘strong consensus’, with Principals identifying a need for more devolution of responsibility to colleges. Regimes of regulation had become ‘dysfunctional’ and increased devolution was seen as ‘allowing colleges to respond flexibly and creatively to the needs of their communities’ (Chapman et al., 2009: 9). The report goes on to comment:

This top-down, managerialist approach is now being questioned both within government and by authoritative external commentators (e.g. the Foster Review 2005). Whilst the tightly managed regime since 1997 could be seen to have improved quality, increased...responsiveness and reduced poor provision, it is increasingly viewed as breeding micro management, excessive control from the centre, a rigid “soviet tractor mentality” and a compliance culture, all of which has damaging consequences. The government accepts that the next great leap in public services from ‘good to great’ will require innovation, flexibility and ownership from front line staff. There is a growing recognition that this leap requires each college to have greater autonomy to meet the needs of its locality, flexibly and creatively.

Chapman et al., 2009: 9

This diagnosis is a helpful starting point for asking whether the relationships colleges have to policy appear different in Scotland and Wales, and then whether or not this is likely to matter, and to whom.
Contexts for collaboration

As was noted in Chapter 1, the neo-liberal reforms associated with Thatcherism, so highly visible in England from the early 1980s, were to some extent resisted in Scotland and Wales, and the subsequent processes of devolution have built upon these differences. These underlying cultural issues and the varying influence of neo-liberal thinking are a suitable point at which to begin a comparison.

In Wales, momentous economic changes (especially in the valleys of the south and in respect of mining and the steel industry) give a distinctive context for contemporary FE provision. The most visible effect is high unemployment. However, policy affecting FE provision is also generated and interpreted against a backdrop of a high prevalence of socialist values and cooperative endeavour. It is likely that this history has contributed to the forging of genuinely collaborative arrangements of the sort (increasingly) necessary to be successful in bidding for European or regeneration grant money. There is also direct promotion of collaboration from the Welsh Assembly. As one college leader said:

First of all I would compare it to England...competition there is pretty sharp, because the funding mechanism requires it, and it is a very Thatcherite funding mechanism. Wales has a different tradition, coming from the industrial revolution and from socialism, of trying to work together more. We have more cooperatives, we actually have a body in the Welsh Assembly that seeks to increase the number of cooperatives, and to make them much more effective. So there is an underlying feeling that in the public sector at the very least, bodies should work together. The Assembly has said that right from the beginning...they don't necessarily see that as putting colleges back into local authority control...but they do seek to find ways to
enable schools and colleges to work together, universities and colleges to work together more effectively. The first few years they had the policy but they were not particularly good at it, so it was more hectoring than reality. But things like the European Union funding, that Wales has had quite a lot of, Objective One, and now the latest round, have meant that to get the funds, bodies had to work together. At first it was “well alright, we’ll sign the letter of intent for each other, and you’ll get yours and I’ll get mine”, but it has moved beyond that, certainly with the latest round, where the Welsh Assembly has been looking for much larger and broader projects, and therefore lip service partnership is no longer good enough...So in reality, you are obliged to work together. So there is some real pressure, mainly driven out of Europe, but then it spills across to other things.

College Principal, Wales

This Principal went on to describe how these tendencies also had to be understood in the context of Wales as a small country, which if it was part of England would perhaps be one or two counties. It has a population under three million, yet has regions, and 22 local authorities, a feature that could often frustrate efforts to achieve social change and one that was sometimes described as ‘Redwood’s revenge’.

A particularly influential policy in Wales is focused on ‘transformation’ (DCELLS, 2008). This major policy document is about bringing together schools, colleges, work-based learners and higher education to find more efficient and effective ways of organising provision. Part of its executive summary gives a strong sense of its texture as a policy:

This paper proposes a national framework to support the transformation of the provider network in Wales and invites proposals to be submitted that respond to the need for change. We have very deliberately designed the national transformation
framework to encourage local solutions to local needs, rather than apply a one-size-fits-all model across Wales. The framework also recognises that discussions between providers on new ways of working together are already happening around Wales – we warmly welcome these initiatives.

DCELLS, 2008: 5

There have been more and less successful examples of such transformations to date, but one of the more successful was where a local authority and a university had agreed to build a new sixth form college on a site next to an existing FE college, which the FE college would run. Instead of having four secondary schools, each trying to provide a sixth form, there would now be a large provider that could offer a much better range of opportunities. Although it had taken many years to come to fruition, this example had itself been important for policy. It had ‘inspired the transformation agenda in Wales’:

When you look across Wales, far too many of the sixth forms are small, and the Welsh averages for UCAS points and numbers going on to higher education are well below those for England...people don’t get a good deal from the sixth forms, though there are some exceptions. But especially in the valleys, I think education would be improved by removing sixth forms throughout the valleys area.

Int: Are you facing new encouragements at the moment for new forms of collaboration or partnership?

Yes, we have what’s called the Learning and Skills Measure (National Assembly for Wales, 2009). That says that at the age of 14, schools have to offer 28 courses, of which at least six have to be vocational, and they can’t offer them without working with a college for work-based learning...And at 16 they’ve got to provide 32 (courses), again with at least six being vocational. The Assembly has made it clear to schools that it will be reviewing not only what they offer, but what people actually do.

Int: And mergers?
We are seeing six mergers between colleges going on...We are regularly spoken to by the Assembly. They have set a size, they say if you have a budget of £15million you’re viable, but equally it would be nice if there were fewer colleges. So the encouragement is not that powerful....In Powys, there is a different model...a "distributed sixth form" to overcome the geographical challenges.

College Principal, Wales

In Scotland there is what one college leader described as a ‘high level of dialogue between colleges and the central administration’. There is frequent and extensive collaboration, not only within the FE sector but between colleges and community groups, various sector bodies and local authorities (and to a lesser extent between colleges and schools). In England, collaboration is of course present, but as described by the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training, the system is essentially ‘...divided (in both curricular and institutional terms), competitive, and weakly collaborative’ (Hayward et al. 2005: 172). This is, as the Review also points out, to do with policy that simultaneously drives competition and cooperation. But it is also to do with questions of scale and how colleges and college leaders are positioned within each of the three systems.

Interviews with college leaders suggest strongly that in Wales and Scotland, providers are closer to policy and policymakers than they are in England. This is firstly an issue of scale – Wales has 21 colleges, Scotland has 43, whilst England has 361. However, and linked to scale, it is also to do with organisation. Colleges in Wales work together through ColegauCymru, and those in Scotland through Scotland’s Colleges, sharing a voice and to some extent, presenting a united front in policy processes. In England, the Association of Colleges is a large organisation with a national and regional structure. A further grouping, the 157 Group was established in March 2006: this group currently represents 28 large and mainly urban colleges. A comparison of the websites of the four bodies suggests that the 157 Group has a particularly clearly articulated and distinctive mission, and its ambitions
have more in common with the Scottish and Welsh bodies than with the larger, mainly English Association of Colleges.

A further contrast is to be found in the greater number of agencies with an interest or remit bearing upon the English Learning and Skills Sector encompassing Further Education Colleges (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of these).

**Mission, voice and connectedness**

Yet differences seem to rest on more than scale, provider organisations and proximity to policymakers. This became particularly clear in comparing the accounts of the college leaders when they spoke about the mission of their college. It is easy to be cynical about mission statements, but we can say that they are an expression of the direction, purpose and ambitions of the organisation and are generally the result of a process that encapsulates the collective wishes of a Governing body. For this reason they are an important yardstick, and all the college leaders interviewed referred to college mission in explaining their grounds for optimism or pessimism at the current time.

In Scotland, a specific college mission to listen hard and respond to emerging needs in the community had meant that college tutors and leaders were often the first people to notice subtle clues in the local or regional economy: These would include shifts in skill requirements or changes in patterns of employment or in economic migration. On several occasions, an increase or decrease in enquiries from different sorts of learner had functioned as an early warning of something requiring a policy-level response (examples were a decline in certain kinds of apprenticeship in marine engineering and an increase in asylum-seekers and refugees seeking to take advantage of provision for ESOL). After some
degree of sharing between colleges, such messages could - and had - led to shifts in policy and resource allocation. Here, we might conceive colleges as being connected vertically and horizontally in a web-like structure which is sensitive to vibrations that are quite distant from the centre. College missions are important in this process, part of the remit and mandate to college leaders to share information and act on behalf of the college, and there is some confidence that the messages that are ‘passed up the chain’ can produce system-level readjustments.

There is a telling comparison to be made here with an English example. One college leader described how new funding rules coupled with a substantial reduction in resources would mean a large number of redundancies amongst staff. However, it also meant that the college’s longstanding commitments to parts of the community were now in serious jeopardy. The example is particularly revealing of the status of college mission and the nature of the connections with policy-making:

Our adult contract is being cut. And it isn’t even just a cut, it’s that LSC [Learning and Skills Council] is saying, ‘we want you to deliver this, this and this’. We are having to come out of what the LSC says is no longer a priority. Now much of that is community work, engagement work, low level – some of it not even Basic Skills...And the LSC is now saying, ‘our priority has to be this shape, and that’s what you’ve got to do’. So we are now having to come out of things that [the local authority] and the local community would want us to do, and do things that are fundable. Those priorities are national; now you could say that’s fine, they are national priorities, but as a college, our mission is not to meet national priorities. Our college mission is to meet the needs of [the local area]. But the mission is becoming almost irrelevant.

Int: Are there particular casualties of that? Who are they?
Yes. The whole Somalian community is a casualty, because there is no way we can put any funding for ESOL that is not accredited ESOL. But many in the Somalian
community are illiterate in their own language, so they can’t access accredited ESOL. We do work in other areas around courses that are trying to get people back into learning, ‘first steps’ courses. That sort of work will be more difficult to gain funding for. It is ridiculous. Teaching assistants are no longer fundable unless they’re NVQ\textsuperscript{vii}. Now we have a very successful course for people who want to become Teaching Assistants. We will have to offer it as a full-cost course, so only certain people can afford it, and the people doing it are often unemployed and they can’t afford it. Part-time A levels we will no longer be able to offer, they (students) will have to do it full time or pay full cost. Counselling courses we won’t be able to offer any more. And some of the reasons they are not priority is that the actual qualification for a technical reason doesn’t sit on the QCF [Qualifications and Credit Framework]\textsuperscript{viii}…so it’s not even that someone has decided that Counselling is not a priority. And there’s also the international qualification for people who want to be mechanics on aircraft – it’s a qualification they have to have. We are one of the few places providing it, but it is no longer fundable.

Vice-Principal, England

The college in which this senior figure is based is large and very well established. Yet it is important to note that compared to both the Welsh and Scottish examples, there appeared to be a completely different set of relationships framing communications between colleges and the making and implementation of policy. Where the college leaders in Wales and Scotland felt (and readily illustrated) their connectedness to policy-makers, in England it was more a case of a default disconnectedness: firstly, between colleges and policy-makers, and secondly, between policy-makers and an ‘arms length’ funding agency. This disconnectedness required special effort and resources to overcome. Recognising this, the Governors in one college had consciously appointed a new Principal who would be a political player:
Int: So how much of a say do you get? Who listens? Who do you talk to?

...the Principal is trying to address this now. He’s in London almost daily, trying to address these problems, attending Select Committees, talking to ministers. But whether they can change anything now is another question. It is probably quite an interesting case study, the way we are trying to work. At local level, at the LSC, there is really nobody you can have a conversation with about this. And this is not a criticism of the individuals, it’s the way the system works. It’s “this is national policy, the computer calculates this”. And there’s no-one we can have a conversation with regionally about this either.

Int: It’s like an algorithm, isn’t it?

Yes...so the only people [the Principal] can have a conversation with is nationally...or talking to the local authority, the leader of the council, because what’s happening will have a big impact on them, so trying to use them for lobbying. We are working with MPs...we held a stakeholders meeting, we invited all the MPs, anybody really, who might be able to bring some pressure.

**Relationships to quality regimes**

The accounts of college leaders from England, Scotland and Wales also suggested some subtle but important differences in the nature of college engagement with inspection and related quality processes. One college principal (with experience of both systems) compared Wales and England in the following manner:

We have an inspectorate called Estyn and there is a framework that is very similar to England. But England, certainly for the last 10 or 15 years, has had an inquisitorial system. It’s quite harsh, actually. It’s holding you up to the light, you’re not
performing, so we’ll pillory you. The Welsh system has leanings like that, but it is actually quite a bit more supportive, and it will listen to people more...Over the last two years, all the colleges in Wales have had improving grades, and we are heralded by the Inspectorate as the successful part of the education system.

Int: So are there elements of the old HMI ‘professional’ approach?
Yes, and spreading good practice, yes there is. And also we have a body like the AoC, called ColegauCymru and through that, we do a lot of sharing of good practice, a lot, far more than you would see in England.

Int: So is it just college principals who get together for that?
No, no, it’s heads of department, heads of section. For example we have an annual conference for the business studies teachers. HR [Human Resources] people get together, finance people too. There are something like 43 networks for sharing good practice, and I would say about 30 of those are curriculum areas, so that makes quite a difference. And we do talk to the Inspectorate and to the Assembly about what they mean by quality, and do they know what they mean by quality.

Int: So you do function as a pressure group
Yes, as a lobby group. And we are exploring at the moment self-regulation. One of the tasks for this year is to come up with a model for self-regulation for colleges.

College Principal, Wales

This account illustrates the point made earlier about organisations. It also indicates a positive regard for (and a positive engagement with) a quality regime. What is perhaps most interesting about it is that it came from a Principal who had had a very negative experience just a few years earlier, in which an inspection process had presented an account of a college that he, the staff and the governors found ‘unrecognisable’. Subsequently the college had ‘stood its ground’, questioning the conduct of the inspection and the legitimacy of the outcome.
In Scotland, a recent review of inspection had included college leaders and had powerfully reinforced the idea that quality assurance was a collective responsibility:

I think (that here) it is different to England. We worked with the Inspectorate and the Funding Council to conduct a review of the inspection model that we had, and it is a review model that we have now...We used to have an inspection framework which suggested what you had to have, whereas now it’s up to us to determine, by evidence, what should be included. We have Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) as the one agency that looks right across education, and they have now taken on looking at provision outwith colleges, in a wider way. So we share Her Majesty’s Inspectors with the schools, community learning and development, but now also with Jobcentre Plus, and prisons. In any inspection you would have a lead officer, but in my college I’ll have a number of people who are associate inspectors, who work for the inspector, and I will agree to their release...and they go away for a week to do an inspection and then they come back. Every college in Scotland has some associates in it. In the beginning they were concentrated in a small number of colleges. But everyone started to see that associates were helping to develop a greater understanding, so it was a positive thing. Those are selected by HMI, and on the panel there would also be a Principal.

College Principal, Scotland

In England, there is a widely held perception that the inspection regime is moving back towards a model that includes greater dialogue. A recent inspection of part of the provision of a large college had endorsed all the strengths and areas for improvement identified in the college’s own self-assessment and provided one further issue which had not been identified by the college itself. Carried out under a revised approach introduced from September 2009,, the inspection was the first the college had had which made recommendations as well as giving grades (in the past inspections would provide ‘areas for improvement’). Colleges
welcomed and valued this shift, since it opened up the possibility of a conversation or a dialogue about the different ways in which a recommendation could be responded to. One college leader also pointed out the advantages of only having a few weeks of notice of an inspection, and though this did mean that ‘we did nothing else for four weeks’, dealing with inspection was at least limited to that period.

College leaders were content with the outcome of the inspection, and pleased that the inspection had been characterised by more dialogue than some in the past. It had also been ‘very capably led by someone who understood what the college was about’. At the same time, various college personnel were critical of how inspectors seemed to make assumptions on not very much evidence. The college leader in question said ‘I do have an issue with the level of observations. They do 50, and make an assumption, and we do 900’. Inspectors had also formed impressions on the basis of single, unrepresentative incidents and college staff were irritated that they had to put considerable energy into demonstrating that such impressions were unfounded.

These revised arrangements for inspection are perceived by many in the sector as representing a more proportionate and efficient use of Ofsted resources as well as giving a more thoroughgoing role to self assessment. However, college leaders felt a heavy irony in all this. No sooner had the college been judged to be outstanding in meeting learner needs and in partnerships (both were central to the college mission) than it now faced the effects, described earlier, of remote and formulaic funding decisions which undermined its very strengths. It would seem that a clear and collective mission and independent evidence that the associated practices are ‘outstanding’ can still add up to little in terms of influence on policy.

Learning cultures
It is one thing to draw the sorts of comparisons made thus far, and to try to learn from them. Yet how important are they? Is it possible (as was suggested in one of the seminar discussions preceding this book) that similarities and differences of the order we have been identifying may not actually matter much to learners and teachers, those ‘on the ground’ in colleges? To address this point, we turn here to the concept of learning cultures. Developed within the ESRC TLRP, in the project Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education (‘the TLC project’), the concept challenges the idea that teaching and learning are just individual activities that happen to be located in an institutional, geographical, political or economic setting. The argument is that teaching and learning are much better understood as practices that are part of a learning culture. The original project, which focused on FE in England, proposed that a great deal of what happens in the name of learning is highly structured by systems and mechanisms of inspection, funding and audit as well as the nature of the relationship to a vocational field, or to other vocational and academic programmes. Of course, tutors, managers and students do a great deal to reshape these effects in various ways, and are themselves important contributors to the learning culture in accordance with their dispositions, values or pedagogic preferences. The central point here is that these people are ‘representing’ (as well as ‘re-presenting’) something: they embody and enact the structures around them, but not exactly as they please. Furthermore, this matters greatly because:

A learning culture will permit, promote, inhibit or rule out certain kinds of learning. This means that the key issue is how different learning cultures enable or disable different learning possibilities for the people that come into contact with them.

James and Biesta 2007: 28
A learning culture is not, then, just another way of talking about the environment around the learner or the learning process, and as such it suggests a conscious break with the various psychological models that position learning as individualised and primarily cognitive. As the social practices through which people learn, a learning culture is a way of bringing into view (and keeping in view) the circumstances that have given us a current set of practices, and which current practices reproduce, refine or challenge. The concept is helpful at a variety of ‘scales’ too: just as a course of study has a learning culture, so might a college, a particular qualification, and to some extent an entire sector. This is another way of saying that any particular practice will be an expression of a set of forces (or a *field* in Bourdieu’s sense – see e.g. Grenfell and James, 2004; Vandenberghe, 2000).

**Zooming out: the learning culture of the FE sector**

The TLC project suggested that one of the distinctive features of the English FE sector was the nature and source of policy concerned with teaching and learning and its improvement. The project noted a paradox: that repeated calls for the improvement of teaching and learning in FE were accompanied by a silence about learning. Coffield’s earlier comment on this issue still seemed apposite:

> In all the plans to put learners first, to invest in learning, to widen participation, to set targets, to develop skills, to open access, to raise standards, and to develop a national framework of qualifications, there is no mention of a theory (or theories) of learning to drive the whole project. It is as though there existed in the UK such a widespread understanding of, and agreement about, the processes of learning and teaching that comment was thought superfluous. The omission is serious, and, if not corrected, could prove fatal to the enterprise.

Coffield, 2000:18
The TLC project argued that in some fifty years’ worth of policy documents and related literature, there were continued appeals about the need to improve teaching and learning, but very little that addressed how this might actually be done. There were three main drivers in the policy ‘stories’ about required improvements. One was to do with the ‘problems of youth and social cohesion’; another was ‘the effectiveness of the provision’, particularly in regard to the needs of employers or the need for particular skills; the last was the role of FE in the wider economy, often in the context of global competitiveness. At first glance this appeared to change in the White Paper *Further Education: Raising skills, improving life chances* (DfES, 2006) because it contained an explicit ‘national strategy for teaching and learning in Further Education’: however, once again this did not discuss the nature of teaching and learning, concentrating instead on the agencies, frameworks and mechanisms which it was hoped would ‘drive up quality’. The researchers concluded:

These largely indirect exhortations to improve teaching and learning therefore entail two conflicting assumptions, which we would argue continue to plague the sector. The first is that FE should provide effective responses – sometimes solutions - to a diverse array of social, industrial and economic needs. The second is that this should be achieved with ever-increasing efficiency. Pedagogy is little more than the ‘pharmakos’ here (Girard, 1977), the scapegoat paraded through these tales but then expelled from them.

Colley et al 2007: 49

The silence identified by Coffield and then underlined by the TLC project is no doubt due in part to the sheer diversity of provision that is encompassed in FE colleges. This diversity is conventionally understood as a diversity of subjects, vocational areas and levels. The TLC analysis showed that a diversity of concepts and practices of teaching and learning was just as important. For example, one could find, side by side in the same college, a course where learning was defined mainly in terms of acquisition, and another in which it largely took the
form of participation (see Sfard, 1998, for a helpful discussion of such metaphors). If we add
to this the sector’s celebrated flexibility and responsiveness to a diverse array of
requirements and needs, we begin to see why it is that colleges appear more vulnerable to
policy than schools and universities. Colleges ‘embody’ flexibility and responsiveness, and a
plurality of legitimate practices which are quite different but all called ‘learning’. The Foster
Review saw this as a major problem, arguing that ‘[a]bove all, FE lacks a clearly recognised
and shared core purpose’. It went on to re-assert two of the regular ‘policy stories’ already
mentioned, insisting that ‘the way forward in resolving these causes (sic) includes an
appetite to catch up with competitive international economies’ and ‘a consequential core
focus on skills and employability’ (Foster, 2005: 6).

Whether or not one agrees with the diagnosis and remedy presented by Foster, it is possible
to argue that the embodying of diversity mentioned above means that FE learning cultures
are especially prone to a high degree of policy inscription. If this is the case, the corollary is
that colleges have little or no voice in policy processes and are forced constantly to respond
to policy shifts with relatively little mediation or home-grown variation. The only way that
colleges could change the key characteristics of this relationship is through organisation of
the sort that has been much more evident in Wales and Scotland than in England (but which
may be developing, for some, via the newer 157 Group in England).

**Zooming in: management and professionalism in the learning culture**

The TLC project noted the affinity between on the one hand the ‘entrepreneurial’ nature of
FE colleges, responding to constant changes in policy that affect the nature and volume of
work and, on the other hand, staff recruitment practices characterised by informality and
uncertainty. The frequent use of fractional and temporary contracts, a proliferation of roles
and titles, and the lack of parity with other sectors of the educational world had all
contributed towards casualisation and low morale. Against this backdrop, the researchers looked at what ideas about professionalism had currency ‘on the ground’. A surprising finding here was that whilst many tutors complained about issues such as pay, regimes of audit and inspection, lack of recognition of their expertise, reduced autonomy through performance management and so on, these complaints did not seem to come from a shared or particular political position. Instead,

‘...they arose from strong commitments to teaching, to fostering student learning and development, to attending to learners’ needs, and to self-development of learning as a professional. Time and again, our data gave us examples of tutor frustration because regimes of funding, management and audit/inspection prevented or made more difficult the exercise of judgement based on experience.

James and Gleeson, 2007: 130

The real surprise here was the strength and depth of professional identity, meaning so much more than the ‘restricted’ idea of doing a job well in terms of a specification. Whilst the college leaders and managers continually responded to the shifting policy agenda in order to maintain the college as a business, tutors invariably had their own strongly-held positions on what was possible, reasonable or desirable in the circumstances. Sometimes this led to tutors resigning, (as for example in the case of a modern languages A level, where the class contact hours per week were reduced year on year until they reached a level the tutor regarded as unsustainable and incompatible with doing a worthwhile job). For others it led to ‘underground learning’, where a clash between systems and tutors’ own values resulted in considerable self-imposed exploitation as they strove to personally resource activity they regarded as still being necessary but which college resources no longer supported (see James and Diment, 2003). For yet others it produced considerable subversion or ‘principled infidelity’ (Wallace and Hoyle, 2005) as tutors found ways of keeping up quality by mitigating
the worst effects of the expectations of inspection, rules derived from audit, or a particular management requirement.

The tension between the audit culture and professionalism is a much-discussed topic (see for example Biesta, 2004; Ball, 2005; Coffield et al. 2008, Sennett, 2009). We found that such things as performativity and the use of targets for progression, retention and achievement were not just ‘context’, and not just something for the outward-facing senior managers to respond to. Rather, they changed the nature of the tutor-manager relationship and in turn affected what tutors and students did together in practice. Some would argue that in FE, leadership and management are being supplanted by managerialism (defined as the assumption that ‘...all aspects of organisational life can and should be controlled...that ambiguity can and should be radically reduced or eliminated’ - Wallace and Hoyle, 2005: 9). As we noted in the TLC project:

There is a strong affinity between a belief in managerialism and a continuing tendency to see professionalism as old-fashioned, as self-serving and as incapable of a flexible response to client need – and therefore as the wrong place to look for the generation of improvement.

James and Gleeson 2007: 134

The project demonstrated that a strong sense of professionalism had not been obliterated by increasing prescription or by a high pace of radical change in provision. On the contrary, it seemed likely that the pace of change in colleges (and what some termed ‘the culture of the now’) may even have helped to bolster a strong sense of professional identity separate to identifiable with or loyalties to the college. Nevertheless, there were constant and sometimes painful clashes between tutors’ professional dispositions, often formed much earlier and in different conditions, and the subsequent expectations or requirements placed upon them in the college. In Bourdieusian terms, this may be conceived as a *habitus* with
professional capital which is progressively less recognised in the field, rather like landing in a foreign city and having the wrong currency. Indeed, the more one has of the wrong currency, the greater the sense of injustice or inconvenience one might experience.

**Conclusion**

The analysis here underlines many of the conclusions reached by Raffe and Spours (2007) in their comparison of models of policy learning and policy-making in 14-19 education. Some three years on, there seems to be continued evidence for their observation that Scotland and Wales can be characterised as a collaborative model, where, ‘Many of the institutional forms associated with the politicised model in England, such as central policy units and non-elected advisers detached from policy departments, are absent or weaker (20). They also noted ‘a spirit of partnership (which) has informed policy development and implementation’ (21).

As well as adding some confirmation to such distinctions, this discussion has pointed to quite sharp contrasts in the nature of the connections and relationships between providers and policymakers and policy processes between the three countries. Of particular note is how college mission continues to have a saliency or legitimacy in Scotland and Wales which, it seems, may be being lost in England. There also appear to be marked differences in the policy-framed expectations and possibilities for collaboration with other colleges and between colleges and other providers. Furthermore, and most marked of all, there is at least some evidence in Scotland and Wales suggesting that dialogue with (and occasional influence upon) policymakers is a normal expectation of all parties. By contrast, some leaders in English colleges perceive that they have little or no chance to influence the
development and implementation of policy, and it would appear that even the most determined efforts of this kind may have little impact.

In preparing this chapter it has not been possible to conduct a repeated TLC project for Scottish and Welsh FE and thereby provide equivalent data and analysis to the English case. Yet, for present purposes, this is not a significant problem. Though it was conducted in England, the TLC project is most useful here as a reminder that the texture of policy does reverberate right through to what teachers and learners and others actually do ‘on the ground’. To put this another way, the nature and tone of the relationships between colleges and the individuals, agencies and policies that frame their work – something we have seen can differ markedly between England, Scotland and Wales - is one of the most important things shaping the learning culture. The recent denial of ESOL to large swathes of a Somalian community in an English city, with no discussion of whether that is what the college or any section of its community would see as the best way to realise a cut in resources, is just a particularly visible example of something that is ever-present.

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i John Redwood was Conservative Secretary of State for Wales between 1993 and 1995 in John Major’s cabinet.

ii See [http://www.colegaucymru.ac.uk/who_we_are-6.aspx](http://www.colegaucymru.ac.uk/who_we_are-6.aspx)


iv See [http://www.aoc.co.uk/en/about_us/](http://www.aoc.co.uk/en/about_us/)

v See [http://www.157group.co.uk/welcome](http://www.157group.co.uk/welcome)

vi As at August 2010 – see [http://www.157group.co.uk/](http://www.157group.co.uk/)

vii I.e. unless the courses include a National Vocational Qualification

viii The Qualifications and Credit Framework. See [http://www.qcda.gov.uk/qualifications/60.aspx](http://www.qcda.gov.uk/qualifications/60.aspx)