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Organisational culture of further education colleges delivering higher education business programmes: developing a culture of 'HEness' – what next?

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This paper draws on the views of lecturers working in and delivering college-based higher education (CBHE) in the UK. There have been numerous works on the culture of higher education in further education (HE in FE). However, as noted by some literati, the culture of further education (FE) is not easy to define, and does not readily lend itself to the incorporation of a higher education (HE) culture. This could be due to the large number of changes FE has had to adopt owing to various government policies. The study comprises 26 in-depth individual interviews conducted at various further education colleges throughout the Yorkshire and Humber region of the UK. Via the use of an interpretivist approach, common themes and word use were extracted from the narratives for analysis. The organisational culture of these further education colleges was relatively easy to define, the word 'blame' being one of the common themes. However, when identifying if the individual colleges had a HE culture; this proved more difficult.

Keywords: Culture; HEness; HE in FE; performativity; managerialism; funding

Introduction

This paper looks at further education colleges (FECs), (the focus being on business schools or departments), as employing organisations and, how the culture of these individual organisations may affect their employees. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to consider how employees (lecturers) perceive their culture; can their organisation adopt a culture that, in reality, is foreign to its own established culture? Further, the paper, will introduce new literature on the subject, which will offer further validation to the discussion and subsequent findings, not just from the UK, but from other parts of the world, such as Canada (Woodhouse 2009), the United States of America (Conway 1970; Parry 2013), and Australia (Adams 1998).

The culture of FECs, especially those delivering higher education programmes (HEPs) has been a moot point in many publications (see the works of Elliott and Hall 1994; Elliott and Crossley 1997; Feather 2011a; HE in FECs Expert Programme Project Team 2009; Lumby 2003; Parry and Thompson 2002; Parry and Thompson 2007; Scaife 2004; Smith 2007; Temple 2001); this paper will moot the point further, by adding a different perspective to those authors listed.

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The primacy of the culture within FECs is still significant today, as evidenced by two recent reports, one for the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAAHE) by Simmons and Lea (2013), the other for the Higher Education Academy (HEA) by Healey, Jenkins, and Lea (2014). Simmons and Lea (2013) for example, argue that FECs need to introduce a higher education (HE) ethos into the culture of FECs that deliver HEPs. The reasoning behind this suggestion is to provide students in further education (FE) with a HE experience. However, this could be problematical, as FECs could be said to be multi-pedagogical in that they deliver: training, FE, HE, 14–19 education, and so on (Hall 1990; Hodkinson 2008; Parry 2009). Healey, Jenkins, and Lea (2014), argue a contrary viewpoint, in that their research identifies how some FECs have fervently embraced the corporate culture of the commercial sector (the same could be said now of HE). They suggest that many UK FECs now adopt a managerialist culture, where 'one's allegiance is first and foremost to one's employing institution rather than to an academic discipline, or a notion of academia beyond institutional boundaries' (Healey, Jenkins, and Lea 2014, 13). This is in direct opposition to Meek's (1988) argument where it is suggested that the lecturers' allegiance is to their profession rather than the college or university. Hodkinson (2008) likens this to the 'ecologies of practice' (Stronach et al. 2002), and that lecturers in FECs may have a sense of altruism. Healey, Jenkins, and Lea (2014) further argue that the culture of many FECs has become stifled, where compliance and surveillance are the norm; Stronach et al. (2002) and Hodkinson (2008) refer to this as 'economies of performance'.

The main point expressed by Healey, Jenkins, and Lea (2014) in their report is the notion of a research-based curriculum within FECs, where students are taught how to be scholars, or how to undertake scholarly activity, somewhat akin to what lecturers in higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to do, and now lecturers in FECs. But this is contrary to other research, where it has been found that lecturers do not necessarily have skills or time to undertake research, nor wish to (Feather 2011c, 2012; Harwood and Harwood 2004; Healey, Jenkins, and Lea 2014; HEQC 1993; King and Widdowson 2009; Young 2002); or undertake it during their own time, often referred to as 'underground working' (Hodkinson 2008), as it is not viewed by some colleges as part of the lecturers' roles when at work.

From the above, one could view FE as surrounded on all sides by different expectations, or as Hall (1990) and Ainley (2000) argue, FE is similar to Poland in World War II, on one border is Germany (schools), another, Russia (higher education), and on another, Austria-Hungary (training). Feather (2011a) likens this to an exclave, developing within an enclave, that is, a culture surrounded by different cultures within the overarching culture, but in this instance a 'them and us' culture. However, today HE in FE has been rebranded, and is now known as college-based higher education (CBHE), (Healey, Jenkins, and Lea 2014; Parry 2009).

The question therefore, is: do lecturers delivering higher education business programmes (HEBPs) perceive that their FEC can bring about a culture of HEness in FE (Lea and Simmons 2012), or is a bureaucratic and managerialist culture the norm (Healey, Jenkins, and Lea 2014; Hodkinson 2008)?

Theory

As Feather (2011a) highlighted, the first FEC in the UK came into being in 1821 (British Training International 2006) and first appeared in official regulations in

1917 (Richardson 2007). Due to new skills needed from the end of World War II onwards (Richardson 2007; Simmons 2014), FECs have had to reform time and again, thus, over time forming numerous partnerships with various institutions, for example the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) in the 1980s and the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) in the 1990s (Elliott 1996; Feather 2011a). From these, and future reforms, it has been necessary for FECs to make significant changes to their policies, procedures, and practices, so much so, that FECs (as a result of these changes), may have lost their original identity (Ainley 2000), and thus become amorphous. This is further evidenced when Parry and Thompson (2002, 2007), and Parry (2009) argue that FECs may have become hybrids, as they have to simultaneously incorporate both a FE and HE ethos, or 'HEness' (Lea and Simmons 2012). However, the introduction of a HE ethos within FECs has proven problematical, as some lecturers find it difficult to make the transition from teaching a class at the FE level, and then delivering a class immediately afterwards at the HE level (Feather 2010, 2011a; Lea and Simmons 2012; Silver 2003). Further, that 'academic and policy literature has repeatedly expressed some concerns about the difficulties of nurturing an HE culture within a wider FE culture' (Simmons and Lea 2013, 2). This point is reified when Tummons, Orr, and Atkins (2013) argue that the significant differences between HE and HE in FE are in truth affected by the differing values of those of HE and those of FE, and the HE in FE are more distinct again. As Tummons, Orr, and Atkins (2013, 18) highlight 'the suggestion that FE should, and does, have its own distinctive HE in FE ethos, reflect[s] the conflicting views and priorities of those involved in HE, from governmental policy makers to lecturers in colleges and universities.' Further, within a HE in FE culture, there is more pressure on lecturers to teach or as Scaife (2004, 2; original emphasis) terms it '*to do the stuff*', (also see the works of Feather (2011a) for a more in-depth discussion on teaching pressures). In addition to what has been written in relation to switching between teaching HE and then FE modules, Feather (2011a) found that lecturers had to teach modules where they had no knowledge of the subject. For example, one of his interviewees in FE delivering HE was asked to deliver a FE French language module, despite the fact that he could not speak, write, or understand the French language.

One concern is raised by Meek (1988, 461), who writes that

> several studies have shown that academics may tend to give greater allegiance to their profession than their college or university, which may produce conflict between the interest of the individual academic and the interests of those who manage the institution.

In contrast, Healey, Jenkins, and Lea (2014) argue that an individual will show greater allegiance to their FEC than their academic discipline. However, one could argue that an individual academic may show more allegiance to his or her own values, morals and beliefs (Price and Whiteley 2014; Rollinson 2005), for example, lecturers' commitment to teaching, and their students (Young 2006). In addition to the above on allegiances, it would appear Young's (2006) research on lecturers in post-1992 universities offered a negative view of this. When asking lecturers if their institution rewarded effort for teaching, she evidenced that 34 of her 46 interviewees offered negative responses towards this question; one of her interviewees stated:

> In terms of my status and standing in the discipline, the academic world, it matters not one tiny little jot. I mean I've talked to people who are crap teachers and still got promoted. So I'm afraid in the academic world it counts for bugger all. (Young 2006, 193)

If this were the case in post-1992 universities concerning teaching and research, how then would college-based higher education (CBHE) contend with this? To have a culture that embraces teaching and research, and if research were high on the agenda, when in reality, the allegiance of lecturers in FECs is aligned to teaching and supporting students (Hodkinson 2008), may be oxymoronic. Silver (2003) might agree with this when arguing that

> there is, therefore, the constant likelihood of rival or conflicting values and allegiances. The symbols and myths shared most keenly by individuals and groups in an institution may not be those treasured by the institution itself. (Silver 2003, 158–9)

This could be akin to Meek's (1988) view, writing from an Australian perspective, of a 'concept borrowed', where he argues that

> some recent studies of organizational or corporate culture [are based upon] ... 'pop cultural magicians', 'tricksters' who make their living by convincing North American and European corporate executives that they can equal the productivity of Japanese industry through mechanical manipulation of organizational symbols, myths and customs. Such studies are not much concerned with theory of any sort, but seize upon fads in the realm of ideas. (Meek 1988, 454)

In light of this, one could apply this to the UK government's policy in relation to delivering more HE in FE, where Feather (2010) argues that FE has borrowed the symbols, myths and customs of HE, for example, graduation ceremonies, endeavouring to adopt an HE culture and so on.

Lea and Simmons (2012) identified a further problem, they argue that higher education institutions (HEIs) have autonomy, whereas many FECs (they suggest), do not; the reason is that HEIs award their own qualifications, whereas, FECs award other organisations' qualifications, for example, EDXCEL, OCR, or those of the franchising universities that FECs are in partnership with. Nevertheless, autonomy in HEIs has been shown by various authors to be diminishing (see the works of Geiger 1989; Henkel 2005, 2007; Smith, Ward, and House 2011; Thorens 1998; Woodhouse 2009). The subject of academic autonomy is too broad to discuss in depth here, but it is highlighted to the reader for its potential impact on the perception of HEness. As Henkel (2007, 87) highlights, 'the ideal of academe as a sovereign, bounded territory, free by right from intervention in its governance of knowledge development and transmission, has been superseded by ideals of engagement with societies in which academic institutions are "axial structures".'

Performativity

Feather (2011b) identifies another problem; he argues that because some FECs are having to focus more on funding, that this may possibly be taking precedent over teaching, which in turn, led those lecturers (interviewed as part of his study), feeling that their FECs resembled conveyor belts rather than educational institutions. Fisher (2009) commented that due to performativity issues, that FECs may be viewed as experimental laboratories where new policies and ideas are tested. He argues that

> ever since Further Education colleges were removed from local authority control in the early 1990s, they have become subject both to 'market' pressures and to government-imposed targets. They have been at the vanguard of changes that would be rolled out through the rest of the education system and public services – a kind of lab in which

> neoliberal 'reforms' of education have been trialed [*sic*], and as such, they are the perfect place to begin an analysis of the effects of capitalist realism. (Fisher 2009, 20)

This is further evidenced when Feather (2011b, 436) writes: 'This implies that lecturers in FECs are being used as "lab rats" and as such the government wittingly deracinates their existing culture to bring about changes in education.' However, Joseph (1998) suggested that experimentation is a given if one wishes to understand the 'real world' and the effects of those experiments in any social environment. Basically, 'the facts and experiences that come to light are socially produced, and therefore can be socially changed (Joseph 1998).' (Feather 2011b, 436). As Elliott and Hall (1994) and Loots and Whelan (2000) identify, FECs are forced to implement policies that are quantitative and measure performativity within the FE culture, which do not have synergy with each other; more so, as the traditional culture of FE was one that valued lecturers as human beings, not 'lab rats' (Elliott and Hall 1994; Feather 2011b; Hodkinson 2008; Wolf March 2011). On this, Lea and Simmons (2012, 182) write:

> It is our contention that these dimensions [of performativity] have so permeated the typical FEC, that it has had the effect of constituting a serious barrier to their ability to produce a culture of HEness. For example, FE teachers are now treated as employees of corporations, and accountable to the strategic objectives of those corporations.

However, one needs to consider whether 'HEness' is a culture that can be incorporated into FE. As Weatherald and Moseley (2003) identified, even though an FEC may enter into a partnership with a HEI, the teaching hours, pay, and conditions may remain the same, or that those teaching HE in FE (in some institutions) were segregated out from their FE colleagues and moved into separate buildings (Feather 2009). From this, I contend that, despite UK governments (past and present) endeavouring to make FECs a homogenous place of education, in fact, they may through their various policies and practices, be helping atomise the culture of FE. For example, when discussing HE, Willmott (1995) argued that there was a division of labour taking place in higher education; as identified above, Feather (2009) suggests that this may have already occurred in FE. Further, as Gleeson, Davies, and Wheeler (2005, 449) identify, some lecturers in FE do not have their roots in the profession of teaching nor may enter it by choice, they 'just slide into it'. That is, some of these lecturers enter into teaching out of necessity, for example, lifestyle changes (recently divorced, been made redundant, or have had to relocate) (Feather 2009, 59; Gleeson, Davies, and Wheeler 2005, 450). When discussing this from a HE perspective Whitchurch (2013) argues that her respondents viewed this with some degree of trepidation and suspicion.

Exclave

Feather (2011a) argued that there was a 'them and us' culture manifesting in some FECs as some lecturers that delivered HEBPs saw themselves as better than their FE counterparts; even some of those who also taught on FE programmes. To this end, he argued that these lecturers who taught HEBPs could be viewed as an exclave manifesting within an enclave; that is, 'a cultural territory surrounded by other cultural territories' (Feather 2011a, 22). He goes on to identify that

> they [the lecturers delivering HEBPs] see themselves as different to their colleagues and as such may have fallen under the 'Narcisstical' reflection of the 'Oxbridge model' (Stiles 2004), and wish to appear as part of this group, or at least on a similar level. (Feather 2011a, 22)

Beckett's (2007) report in the *Guardian* newspaper offers some support to the above claim when relaying that the elite FECs have formed the '157 group'

> named after paragraph 157 of the Foster review of further education ... [where] fewer than 30 colleges meet the group's strict entry criteria ... with a turnover of £35 m a year .... and an Ofsted rating of one or two (the highest) for management and leadership can join. (Beckett 2007, 9)

One important point to identify here is that the £35 million is somewhat flexible, whereas the criteria set by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), is fixed (Feather 2011a). This then supports the point made by Healey, Jenkins, and Lea (2014) that a managerialist culture is being embedded within FE via policy and directives put in place by the UK government. Yet, as Davies (1997, 7) identifies, FECs are still 'unable to define its place in any other sense than its recently acquired corporate status.' Over a decade later, Parry (2009) argues that this still might be the case.

Communities of practice (CoP) / agency

As discussed earlier, some lecturers may see those lecturers entering into their community (from the commercial sector) with a degree of trepidation and suspicion (Whitchurch 2013), or that they may be viewed as deprofessionalising teaching (Gleeson, Davies, and Wheeler 2005). However, there are other authors who have wrote extensively on 'CoP' or 'agency'; for example, see the works of Archer (2000), Harley, Muller-Camen, and Collin (2004), Bathmaker and Avis (2005), Nagy and Burch (2009), Gale, Turner, and McKenzie (2011), Gourley (2011). As such, it will not be discussed in detail here, but it does evidence that CoP and agency might be affected by the culture within which lecturers operate.

Hill (2000) undertook a study looking at the corporate culture and agency of FECs, where he labelled FECs as the 'flexible firm[s]', which he argues have consistently operated in FECs where the 'core' are the well-qualified full-time members of staff, and the part-time members of staff are seen as the periphery. At the time of writing his paper, there were nearly as many part-time members of staff as there were full-time members of staff (See Hill 2000 for a more in-depth discussion on this). One significant statistic he identified was that out of 687 returned postal questionnaires 60% identified that their FEC did not support the general interests of the lecturers. Loots and Whelan (2000) conducted a similar study in Scotland, but looked at managers' perspectives, rather than those of lecturers. What can be identified from both these studies is that both lecturers and managers are discussing the same issues, those of lack of support, demotivation and the introduction of managerialist practices that are having an effect upon them. Support and motivation are two of the key factors when discussing agency (Roth 2011), so from this it would appear that there may be a lack of agency within FECs, whether in England, Scotland, Australia, or other countries that deliver HE in a tertiary institution.

To understand agency, in reality, could be viewed as a 'wicked problem', or super-complex in nature. However, to discuss this in full would be far beyond the

scope of this paper, but I would recommend that the reader (as a starting point), consider the work of Roth (2011) who endeavours to break agency down into its constituent categories.

Whitchurch (2013) introduces another dimension, the concept of 'third space'. This is the grey area that individuals operate within when they come together for a specified task; for example a person from the commercial sector and an academic, or from across schools or departments, where the normal cultural boundaries are crossed by each individual (Whitchurch 2013). As such, it is the people with a certain specialism that are brought together to perform a task; in a business context these teams or groups of individuals are called 'strategic business units' (SBUs) (Gupta 1987; Rollinson 2005). Which may introduce further complications, as a number of school or departmental cultures are suddenly thrown together to accomplish a certain task. This means that like any group placed together for the first time, it may pass through a number of stages, namely: forming, storming, norming and performing (Seck and Helton 2014). It may well be that the group could jump straight to the performing stage if they have worked together before, but as Seck and Helton (2014) identify, a fifth stage was identified, one of 'adjourning', and that it may well be that the group goes through the four initial stages again after a period of adjournment.

Method

The study is one of a qualitative nature, and because of this approach an interpretivist paradigm was adopted for this research. The reason was that I wished to understand how lecturers within FECs delivering HEBPs perceive the culture they work in, and that of the culture in a higher education institution (HEI), either real or imagined.

Sample

The FECs were identified via the Higher Education Research Organisation website (HERO Ltd. 2007). Subsequently from this initial search, the principals of FECs (n = 104) were approached for permission to conduct research in their institution. From these, 29 principals gave permission; this figure may seem low, but at the time of the study, a large number of FECs were facing unprecedented pressures from various UK government departments (Feather 2009). A final list of 150 names in total was compiled, and postal questionnaires were sent to these individual lecturers. A final number of 96 (64%) responses were received, this is significantly better than the 14% average response rate for postal questionnaires (Fill 2005); of which, four questionnaires were spoilt and could not be used. The questionnaires identified that 52 individuals volunteered to take part further in the study by agreeing to be interviewed.

The interviewees were selected (from across the Yorkshire and Humber regions of the UK), by using a purposive sampling technique so as to ensure representation of the target sample by capturing important variables (Jones 1955; Robson 2002; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2007). This approach allowed for capturing the youngest and oldest participants, different ethnicities, different levels of teaching experience, equal representation of gender, different job roles, and level of qualification. For example from those lecturers that have no qualifications, to those that

possess a doctoral qualification, this provided a well-rounded representative sample of the overall target sample. The duration of these interviews lasted for approximately 60 minutes.

The interviews were tape-recorded (with informed consent), and later fully transcribed. Random selections of transcribed interviews were sent back to the respective individual interviewees for verification, where they could add, remove, or change information – the interviewees made no changes. From these narratives, common themes, or trends in word use were sought; this offered an insight into these lecturers' perspectives of the culture they worked in and their understanding of how this culture may influence them as individuals. As Smith (2007, 38) writes:

> The private lifeworld [*sic*] of individuals comes to be dominated by public 'systems' and these same systems begin to intrude into areas of human experience and interaction that are connected with culture, socialisation and being human.

Ethics

In the first instance, ethical approval to undertake the research was obtained from the author's employing institution, whereby the research committee approved the research proposal before the study went live. Further, the identities of the individuals for this research are preserved and their rights protected. To ensure their anonymity, individual's names have been changed, for example, the first person interviewed will be identified as 'Int.1' and so on. The same ethical rights will also apply to the institutions which gave permission to conduct this research, and if an institution is named within the narrative, it will be referred to using a mixture of letters, for example, 'FEC 1'. This research complied with the research ethical guidelines as laid down by the British Education Research Association (BERA 2011).

Discussion

From the points raised above from the literature on the subject of CBHE and culture, it becomes evident that no firm conclusions have been reached on how FECs in the UK will embrace a HE culture in an already pre-existing and established FE arena (Parry 2009). It would be practically impossible to cast aside over 100 years of pre-existing FE culture in favour of a new HEness culture. To this end, Parry and Thompson (2002) likened FECs that delivered higher education programmes as 'hybrids'; a term that still lingers today, and one that is not overly flattering towards the hard work that goes on within many FECs. The very use of this term firmly entrenches some FECs outside of both the FE and HE boundaries, and leaves them in a state of limbo, with no real identity; at least when the phoenix rose from the ashes, it was still recognised as a phoenix, but what about those FECs who have taken on this grey identity? Where does that leave them in the views and perceptions of those lecturers who work within these institutions?

Perceptions of FE culture

The question posed to the individual interviewees was, 'How would you characterise the culture of FE?' On this, Int. 5 – a young woman in her early twenties and who had only been in teaching for four years – commented as follows:

> It's erm, it's constantly changing, it's so hard [to characterise] because it's constantly changing. You know, sort of one week is great, and then the next week is, you know, let's deal with that, or that, there's just, there's never any; you never get the chance to sit and reflect on what you've done, and then build on it, which is quite unsettling in some ways. Since I've been here, I've moved faculties three times.

She goes on to discuss how these changes may seem small to management, but for the lecturers, these constant changes have an impact on them as a community. She further argues that 'it's not a small thing to have your line managers constantly changing ... it's a hard place to work when you can't, when you don't know where you stand.' Int. 2 – a Chinese woman in her early thirties, with experience of teaching both in China and in the UK [with over five years teaching experience] – suggested that although the people she worked with were warm, she believed that the management where she worked were 'not good. Very hands-on management approach and you work in, work in office, you feel someone is constantly watching your back, and you don't feel motivated.' Both Int. 6 – a woman in her late forties and with over eight years teaching experience – and Int. 17 – a man in his early sixties with over 15 years teaching experience, suggested that the culture of FE was one of blame. Int. 15 – a woman in her mid-sixties with 18 years teaching experience – discussed 'heroes and villains; 'it's got very bureaucratic ... it's now a business; this word "business" is being drummed into everybody, and how to get new business, and targets and all that.' Int. 15 goes on to discuss how the FEC she works at has become fragmented and how people 'quite rightly I suppose, are trying to look after their own corner.' By this, she meant looking out for, and after oneself; that there was no collegiality anymore. Int. 8 – a man in his late fifties, with over 27 years teaching experience, highlighted how he felt that he and his colleagues were 'surrounded by bureaucracy'. He discussed how the culture at his institution was a 'task' culture, where lecturers were expected to 'just do it'. These findings support those of Fisher (2009) where FECs appear to be focusing more on targets and new business than on their employees at the front end of education (the core business of education [Peters and Waterman 2004]) delivering the programmes to students. Some lectures felt exploited; Int. 14 – a man in his early fifties, with 17 years teaching experience – states:

> I think they're [his colleagues] in a more, more erm [*pauses*], erm [*pauses*], Machiavellian way [*pauses*], and you know, the colleges that I've been to and can think of, are certainly, are, are, a, you know, they're controlled, and they're, they're erm are dominated.

Subsequently, Int. 14 is reminiscing on not just his own experience of one college, but a number of colleges that he had either worked at, or visited as an external examiner. What these interviewees have stated about their individual FECs, concurs with the report by Lea and Simmons (2012), which identifies some real barriers to incorporating a HE ethos into FE. Barriers which Feather (2011a, 2013) identified in his papers, where he showed that it would be difficult if not impossible to undertake this task, as FE's roots are different to those of HE. For example, Gleeson, Davies, and Wheeler (2005, 449), when discussing the complexity of FE, write: 'Tension remains between complex demands of the learning professional and traditional forms of FE practice left unchanged and, as some argue, "proletarianised" by the recent passage of managerial reforms'. As Feather (2013) argues, FECs may be trying to serve too many masters.

Int. 12 – a man in his mid-sixties with over 28 years teaching experience, and looking forward to his retirement in the next year or so, believed that his FEC, and FE in general, no longer had a culture, arguing that

> because it is so [*pause*], such a widespread provider over a number of fields, I'm not sure there is a distinct FE culture any longer [*pause*]. It's erm [*long pause*] it's a culture that sort of says, or, has been dictated to; this is what government policy requires [*pause*] you as a college go out and do it, and individuals within that culture [*pause*] tend to be directed into, into the doing of that [*pause*] instruction.

Int. 17 echoes the above in relation to his FEC, he likened the culture as one of 'fire fighting'; he commented:

> I think FE is [*pause*] err, culture is [*pause*] it's erm [*pause*] I'm trying to think of the right word here [*pause*] it's [*pause*] something [*pause*] it's almost as if we haven't really got a culture. It's, it's sort of, it's sort of, the word stop gap comes to me, you know, we're, we're just sort of [*pause*] rushing here, rushing there, plugging holes, erm bit like a sort of erm, you know, it hasn't got a clear [*pause*] focus, it's very fuzzy, and that's, that's why it's very difficult to describe the culture.

This is similar to Scaife's (2004, 1; original emphasis) view, where he argues that 'all those in FE are harried by frenetic structural instability ... endless policy changes and an *audit culture* of incessant financial and curriculum inspections'.

Int. 17 really wrestled with the answer to the question of what characterises the FE culture. He mentioned how advisers had numerous initiatives, which the FEC was trying to incorporate. He said:

> All these advisors, they keep giving advice; this is a new way of doing this, a new way of doing that, fill in this form, fill in that form. The people who are filling in the forms – there's only one; it's the same group of people – the lecturing staff.

Int. 22 – a woman in her late thirties with 10 years teaching experience – echoed Int. 17's comments, but with a more sinister tone when asked to characterise the culture of her FEC:

> [*Starts laughing*] Well, for a start we'd say don't come in. Erm, within FE the culture erm, it's very unstable, a lot of the smaller colleges get taken over by the bigger ones. It is driven by *funding* [interviewee's emphasis], by targets and [*pauses*] the [*pauses*] management in colleges are quite ruthless. If funding isn't there, then courses are no longer there, they're [management] not interested. Erm, it's not really providing what the community wants, and with the people who are actually there [lecturers] it's a lot of running around like headless chickens, feeling like you can't cope; I've never known a place where so many employees are off with stress.

If lecturers are expected to fill out forms and try and introduce new initiatives, either from the government or government quangos, how can they be expected to instil an ethos of HEness, as Lea and Simmons (2012) suggest? More so, as these lecturers would also be expected to undertake scholarly activity and engage in research so that they can pass these research skills onto their students as suggested in the report by Healey, Jenkins, and Lea (2014). However, this would be difficult to accomplish given that it has been evidenced in other studies (See Feather 2010; Parry and Thompson 2002; Young 2002) that lecturers in FECs have heavy teaching loads and administrative duties. Int. 19 – a woman in her mid-forties, who has taught for 13 years – offers her views on workloads and compliance:

> I think it's [FE culture] one of overworked, hard pressed staff who bend over backwards for the students, but with the FEC, you get the feeling at times, it [the FEC] likes to get compliance from staff. [We] are underpaid, overworked, and try to do the best we can [*starts laughing*].

Int. 18 – a woman in her late forties, and who has been teaching for eight years offers a somewhat different perspective in relation to students, but also offers some insight into how staff in FECs might be coping with these heavy workloads when characterising the culture of FE:

> I would say there are still areas within erm, the curriculum that would, that have delivered the same stuff for the last, God, goodness knows how many years; the same sort of spec, same kind of erm, and they'll deliver that … generally, it tends to be one of being very supportive, very sort of student orientated, and I think sometimes, that can let us down as well; because some students see kindness as a weakness.

Perceptions of HE in FE

In addition to what was identified in the section above entitled 'Exclave', 17 of the 26 lecturers interviewed for this study did not see how a culture of HE could be incorporated into an existing FE ethos grounded in its own values, beliefs, and practices. The common theme arising from the interviews on this subject was that of a culture of 'them and us', others saw it as target and funding driven, with nothing in between. Int. 21 perceived the culture as authoritarian, where you do as you are told. Int. 19 believed that it was labour intensive at her institution, where lecturers felt 'hard pressed and overworked'. Interviewees 6 and 17 (although at different institutions), both used the same terminology, that of a 'blame culture'. In addition, some of the lecturers identified how at their individual institutions, the HE manager was actively engaged in keeping HE and FE teaching separate and / or that HE staff should not mix with FE staff.

On the other hand, Int. 18 perceived that the two cultures could possibly come together, but offered no indication as to why when prompted. She also acknowledged that (at her institution at least) the student would not receive the same experience as those students at a university. This latter point was another common theme emerging from the interviews, for example, Int. 23 believed the same as Int. 18, but believed the problem lay more with the students, in that, FE students are not 'self-starters, or use their own initiative' like HE students at universities. From listening to each of the 26 interviewees, and my subsequent observations of them whilst being interviewed, indicated that there was a large degree of embitterment and resentment in not being allowed to do what they were employed to do. That is, to teach students, to provide them with the necessary life skills they may need when entering, or in some cases re-entering into the work arena.

Funding and bureaucracy

Earlier in the paper I highlighted how Parry and Thompson (2002) referred to FECs as hybrids, that is HE in FE, CBHE, or HEness depending upon whose works one reads. I also stated that this was a most unflattering term to bestow upon a sector of education that was at one time viewed has the 'hand-maiden of British Industry' (Feather 2013; Simmons 2008; Smith 2007), renowned for its excellence in

vocational education, and second opportunities for gaining qualifications. However, with the number of changes required of FE by the UK government and other stakeholders, some FECs today appear to be constantly seeking the next source of funding available to them. The theme of funding was a common term raised in the discussions on culture, as was bureaucracy. For example, Int. 26 – a man in his mid-fifties, with four years teaching experience stated that 'it's [his FEC] quite financially driven'. Int. 13 – a woman in her mid-fifties, with five years teaching experience – when discussing her FEC stated that

> it's [her college] very regimented, a lot of it is around systems and procedures that are required to satisfy the funding bodies ... the crux seems to be that they [management] have to respond to whatever the government policy is … people have good ideas, they have good teaching practice, they have great skills that are not always used to the best effect, because of external agendas that come in and drive it.

Int. 17, when discussing management at his place of work, believed that at his FEC, new initiatives are not driven by management, 'it's driven by government directives, you know, because government [*pauses*] is expecting a great deal; I mean students get very upset if they don't pass'. Int. 17 recounted to me how he keeps information safe and locked away in case of student reprisals from not passing 'we're keeping our emails just in case something goes wrong ... it's slightly worrying, you know, that erm [*pauses*] there's, there's that sort of suspicion, that fear. Quite a lot of people would get out if they could'.

All 26 interviewees mentioned bureaucracy in their discussions with me; as highlighted above, some were afraid to discuss the issues at their particular institution in case of reprisals from management, and thus needed reassurances that their anonymity would be preserved. Int. 1 – a man in his early sixties, with over 13 years teaching experience – told me of the culture at his institution becoming

> a lot tighter, a lot more constrained, I mean, there are colleges, for instance, that, that they require you to actually sign in and sign out [*pause*] erm, [*pause*] that actually make sure that you know, that you're actually there where you're supposed to be. [That] you don't take any more holiday, or you can't work at home, there isn't that much trust any longer.

Int. 6 would subscribe to Int. 1's comments, when she stated that the culture at her FEC is driven by government agenda. Int. 7 – a woman in her late fifties, with 11 years teaching experience – stated, 'I think it's get them in [pauses], get them a piece of paper, and get them out, and you don't fail them [students] in between'; this is somewhat similar to the concept of the production line suggested earlier in the paper. Previously, I put forward Int. 2's comments where she felt that she was constantly being watched, and that the management team were not very good. From this and the other narratives, it can be seen that the perception by lecturers delivering HEBPs of the culture they work in is of being authoritarian and very much task related; driven by ever increasing targets, with fewer resources. As Int. 1 identifies, 'we are expected to do more with less resources.' The culture was seen by some lecturers to be one of blame with Int. 17 commenting that at his FEC 'I notice they're [management] never responsible for things going wrong [*starts laughing*]; there is a phrase, "Teflon Management", you may have heard of it.'

Conclusion

This paper appears to be negative, but offers an alternative insight to working and teaching in FE. It has shown that many of the lecturers interviewed as part of this research saw the culture within their particular FEC as one of blame; some showed degrees of angst when questioned on the subject of the culture of their institution, asking for reassurances that they would remain anonymous. Some of those interviewed stated how they kept information and emails in a safe place in fear of student reprisals for not gaining the grade they were expecting, with one lecturer stating that some students were pre-emptive and would complain if they perceived they were going to receive a bad grade. Other lecturers felt like they were being constantly watched.

Some of the other themes that grew out of the narratives were those of bureaucracy, authoritarianism, constant change, and the relentless seeking of funding. A number of the interviewees felt that any changes that were implemented were not given time to settle in, to ensure that the change was right for the FEC. This high amount of change and merging of faculties produced further angst in what some lecturers already saw as a stressful situation. Further, that the management was so focused on whether they could make the change that they never stopped to reflect as to whether they should undertake the changes they or the advisers were suggesting. Subsequently, if things did not go to plan, it was felt by some of those interviewed, that the blame would be placed on them, rather than management taking responsibility for their own actions; some lecturers referred to management at their institution as 'Teflon' management. On this, Int. 8 commented that in terms of funding, management would sometimes apply for the funding, and then ask the lecturers how they could do the job when the funding was granted to the FEC, 'the instructions we got from management were "just do it!".'

A question that needs asking is 'Can one lay all the blame at the door of management in FECs?' It is evident from the literature, and the interviews I conducted, that management are trying to work within difficult times, keeping their respective FECs viable and people in their jobs where possible. Again, from the literature, it would appear that the blame might lay with the UK governments of yesteryear and today. These governments have taken a sector of education that was recognised for its contribution to both society and employers, and through 'neo-liberal' practices may have forced some FECs in the UK to become 'symbiotic' to the government and its various funding agencies. For example, on the one hand it could be argued that FECs need funding to survive, and if they wish to be part of the 157 group, they will need to have a good Ofsted score and a multi-million pound turnover. On the other hand, government needs FECs to deliver cheap HE, on top of other remits such as COVE (Centres of Vocational Excellence); 14–19 year olds (where children at the age of 14 can leave school to attend a FEC, and undertake further education), to name but two. As Davies (1997, 6) writes, 'At a political level, change in FE was shaped by the themes of deregulation at the local level and centralization at the national level of funding and income streams.' As such, some FECs might be trying to serve too many masters.

From what has been identified in this paper, management within some FECs needs to ask themselves some questions; more so if lecturers are feeling as stressful and frightened as some of those depicted above. If it is a management target to instil a culture of HEness in their institution, management need to consider whether this is

a viable option, can their FEC really offer the same experience or better than an HEI?

Earlier I discussed communities of practice (See Wenger 2008), I also touched upon 'agency' (See Archer 2000; Roth 2011). Smith (2007) terms these as changes to 'lifeworlds', that is, the lecturers' daily work routines and expectations suffer a 'culture shift' (Smith 2007), where changes are made without consultation, or disrupt present working patterns. As Smith (2007, 38) identifies:

> This results in a 'loss of meaning and freedom' that is 'structurally generated'. In other words, the private lifeworld of individuals comes to be dominated by public 'systems' and these same systems begin to intrude into areas of human experience and interaction that are connected with culture, socialisation and being human.

As identified earlier in the paper, Loots and Whelan (2000) found these same factors were impacting on managers in FECs in Scotland; therefore, if the changes that are being introduced by governments are impacting on everyone in a particular FEC, then maybe managers and lecturers need to form an agency to counteract these governmental policies. The problem here, however, is that when governments are controlling all the purse strings, this could be hard to implement. Nevertheless, for management to implement negotiations with lecturers, and other members of staff that are part of the FEC to consider possible ways forward in how management and staff can support each other, and protect their working environment, their culture, would possibly be the first step towards unity.

Finally, this paper would support those findings of Healey, Jenkins, and Lea (2014) in relation to the corporate culture and managerialism exhibited by some FECS. But, like Lea and Simmons (2012) views on HEness, if research, the publication of papers, and teaching students how to undertake research is key, some FECs might find this difficult to incorporate this into their culture (Feather 2011c, 2012).

As Loots and Whelan (2000) identify, each FEC is individual, each FEC knows its social and business communities better than another FEC, or government, so why not allow these FECs to serve these communities in a way that they want to be served, and to meet the needs and wants of the community, not what government or any other body believes it wants. The time for second-guessing is over, let FECs become once more the service provider to both their communities and industry.

From the above discussions one question that may remain for some lecturers in relation to their college is, 'What's next?'

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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