

Using research to enhance professionalism in FE (further education) - what conditions of labour are conducive to practitioner research: the case of FE

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Abstract

An identified historical lack of a 'research culture' in FE (Elliott 1996) may have served to reinforce its secondary or 'Cinderella' status (Randle and Brady 1997) within UK education provision. This study nevertheless determined to explore research engagement where it could be located in five general FE colleges located in the north and north east of England. The purpose of the study was to understand how research and understandings of practitioner professionalism might be connected and how research engagement might even help to rejuvenate practitioner professionalism. Research 'enthusiasts' were identified in colleges through Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) Learning and Skills Research Networks (LSRN). Through a wider sample in each 'enthusiast's' college, comprising their colleagues and managers, their participation in 'research activity' in a broad sense was located within the context of their organisation and the wider FE sector. Participation in 'research activity' by FE practitioners was understood as indicating an engagement in professional understanding and development of practice (Goodrham 2005). All participants were encouraged to define 'research' in their own terms.

The first part of this paper will outline the theoretical development of the study in relation to notions of 'professionalism' (Hoyle 1974, 1995), FE practitioners' conditions of labour and where research activity might theoretically be likely to reside in relation to 'extended' forms of FE practice. It will then explore the importance of dispositional and contextual factors in defining the conditions of labour described by data derived from the study. The second part of the paper will present further case study material to demonstrate the kind of research activity described by individuals' accounts in relation to the dispositionally and contextually determined factors defining their practice. Colleges' organisational priorities with respect to opportunities for research activity were in some cases especially important and examples are described. The paper suggests that the balancing of dispositional and contextual factors is critical to individuals' understanding of their professionalism, their engagement in research activity in FE and that the relationships observed between the two were fragile and easily interrupted when the balance between personal and organisational priorities shifted.

Background

It is helpful here to briefly outline the wider context within which FE practitioners' labour is located. Previous work exploring the conditions of FE practitioner professionalism has noted features of change and continuity (Gleeson et al 2005, Goodrham and Hodkinson 2004) with respect to the major upheaval of Incorporation¹ upon practice. Conditions of service for FE practitioners have been subject to extensive change since 1993 but the primary focus of practice for most, i.e. teaching students, has remained constant. While it is certainly true that learner cohorts may differ to those of ten, fifteen, twenty years ago, change in the sector should be understood in relation to much broader shifts. Recent developments in FE professionalism have mirrored corresponding shifts towards a widening, interventionist policy development across public services (Exworthy and Halford 1999). Similarly, New Right assumptions prioritising consumerism, market hegemony and managerialism in educational reform generally, have underpinned the policy context of FE practice (Avis 1997, 2003). Dimensions of inclusion and community may have been tagged on since the arrival of New Labour to government (Hyland 2002, Hyland and Merrill 2003) but 'a particular understanding of global economic relations' (Avis 1997: 243) continues to give precedence to the market. This is true even with respect to aspects of FE provision grounded in social justice (Avis 1997).

Recent commentators on FE have added significantly to the academic literature and written about specific aspects of practitioner experience; for example contrasting the experiences of new teachers with the attitudes of established ones (Avis et al 2001, 2002a, 2002b, Bathmaker et al 2000, Parsons et al 2001), or in relation to vocational teaching and learning cultures (Colley et al 2003, Davis and Tedder 2003) but very little has focused upon practitioner research in FE (Anderson et al 2003). This study in exploring connections between research and FE professionalism, has tried to partly address this lack and at the same time develop a theoretical understanding of FE professionalism that can accommodate the complexity and ambiguity of practitioner story telling, without resorting to simple oppositional frameworks, for example pitting managers against teaching staff as earlier post incorporation studies into FE may have tended to do (Ainley and Bailey 1997, Cantor and Roberts 1995). Drawing upon work on teacher professional identity (Hoyle 1974, Hoyle and John 1995) and the deconstruction of representations of professional identities (Stronach et al 2002), I explore FE practitioner research engagement in relation to the dispositional and contextual particularities of individual practice.

Conditions of Labour and FE 'professionalism'

Extended and restricted professionalities in flux

Hoyle and John (1995) distinguish between the highly 'contested' notion of a profession and the attributes of teacher professionalism in a way that has been useful to both the theoretical development underpinning this study and the analysis of practitioners' accounts of their dispositions towards their work, derived from the empirical research undertaken. 'Professionalism' refers specifically to practices associated with professional performance rather than the extensive controversy

¹The Incorporation of colleges refers to the FE-HE Act 1992, which released FE institutions from the control of their local authorities and gave colleges responsibilities of self-regulation and independence. This process is identified in much of the existing research literature about FE as instrumental in the transformation of conditions of labour for professional practice in FE.

surrounding the professions and professionalism. In an earlier paper, Goodrham and Hodkinson (2004) located FE practice in relation to research literature exploring the changing role of practice in the sector. They concluded that FE practitioners were typically positioned between competing sets of tensions i.e. internal/dispositional and external/organisational, not necessarily directly in conflict but which inevitably connected individual practice to the location of that practice. It was argued that the balance between these tensions had become increasingly uneven, with an observable acceleration in the pace and scope of external demands upon practitioners having significantly impacted upon practice in the FE sector.

For Stronach et al (2002) the individual's managing of tension between internalised 'ecologies of practice' and external 'economies of performance' lies at the heart of a professionalism that is always 'in flux' (Stronach et al 2002:109). They warn that an excessive imbalance of tension between individuals' ecologies and organisational economies may prove too much for some practitioners to sustain. The notion of 'professionalism' may help define ecologies with respect to those aspects of practice that reflect individuals' dispositional commitment to their jobs. It is possible, therefore, to focus specifically upon aspects of teacher professionalism and acknowledge that while participants did not see FE practice and perhaps teaching in general as a 'true' profession, they did identify highly personalised aspects of their roles as inherently 'professional'. Their accounts also identified the tensions underpinning their work and teacher professionalism as comprising knowledge, the importance of autonomy for 'effective practice' and the values and attitudes at the heart of 'responsibility' (Hoyle and John 1995:18).

Also helpful here is the distinction between 'restricted' and 'extended' professionalities (Hoyle 1974, Hoyle and John 1995:123). In summary, the notion of a 'restricted' professionalism refers to a technical, classroom aptitude that might be envisaged in relation to more technicist views of teaching and learning (Hodkinson 1997), although it should be noted that Hoyle and John (1995) do not suggest that 'restricted' performance denotes anything less than a 'high level of skill' (Hoyle and John 1995:123). 'Extended' professionalism nevertheless represents a broader professionalism, incorporating collaboration and participation in multiple professional development activities, including 'small scale research projects' (Hoyle and John 1995:123). While Hoyle and John (1995) were certain that for schoolteachers this was the norm and that teacher dispositions were most critical in determining preferences for restricted or extended professionalities, for FE practitioners in this study the opportunity to pursue aspects of extended or restricted professionalism depended as much on location within a particular institution and within particular parts of the FE sector as on individual disposition. Conditions of labour were, however, never either simply restricted or extended for individuals but always shifting, in flux. Put another way FE practitioners in the study did not display fixed professionalities.

Disposition, context and professionalism

Individuals' personal dispositions towards their conditions of labour remained crucially important to all participants in the study (see Appendix A). Several participants did not regard FE practitioners as having ever been professional. There were distinctly personal reasons for this. For some it was the extent of external and organisational intervention with respect to educational practice in general.

...well I don't think education (sic) can be viewed as professional people. I think it's one of those words, which is abused to a large extent. For me a professional

person is somebody that's autonomous and makes their own decisions. (Alan – Staff Development Manager)

Another participant, John, agreed but added that it was the fragmented nature of FE conditions of labour, determined by its wide and diverse remit that had historically determined FE practitioners' non-professional status and conditions of labour.

The FE sector's always, just as a sector and as a body organisation, it's always just done what the government's told it because it's weak professionally, it's too fragmented. What have you got in common with a welder or, you know, what have I got in common with someone who does drama? Can I identify with a language teacher, someone who teaches German? Can I identify with someone who does carpentry? (John – Senior Lecturer)

For others the lack of a FE professional body undermined any notion of true practitioner professionalism.

There isn't an appropriate one really for FE teachers, there isn't, if you think about FENTO, they're a standards setting body. They're not a professional body and to me professionalism is tied up with a professional body, having a professional code of practice and code of ethics. (Helen – Learning and Teaching Development Co-ordinator)

Nevertheless, most participants described their own individual practices as rooted in 'professionalism', that is in values and priorities at the centre of their sense of responsibility. For some this was despite believing that their conditions of labour did not recognise their commitment.

I know we're not classed as if we are professional but certainly there's a feeling about being professional within my colleagues, you know the emphasis, we do this, we put on a professional face, we do the job professionally and I don't think that's always I think it's expected by management within this college but it's not always acknowledged. (Geoff – Lecturer)

It was noticeable that practitioners' often understood their 'lesser' status in relation to other 'professional' groups, especially other educators located in schools and universities, who were widely regarded as enjoying a genuine and publicly authenticated professionalism.

Position and professionalism

While dispositional factors were crucial in shaping participants' understanding of their work, location and structurally determined factors were also highly significant. Only nine of the twenty-eight interviewees described themselves as simply lecturers and of these, three used the additional term 'senior' or 'principal' in their lecturer job title. In addition the widespread use of part time and peripheral work contracts and in some cases the combining of temporary, externally funded fractionalised posts to build 'full time' jobs, suggested a pervasive uncertainty and insecurity underpinning patterns of FE employment. David employed as a research project worker spoke for several participants with respect to combining temporary contract work and a part time hourly paid teaching role.

...it's part-time only but I've been working here for over a year on these contracts... it's because I'm so like transferable... that's way it is, the funding

stops, the project stops. Because it is provided on like external funding, the role has to change... (David – part time project worker and PTHP lecturer)

Only four of the sample talked about themselves as being 'part time' but two others, Heather and Shelia, employed on instructor grade contracts and paid below lecturer rates, retained two 0.5 contracts each rather than full time positions and a third, Nancy, like David, combined a 0.5 project worker contract with a part time hourly paid (PTHP) teaching workload. These arrangements meant that roles were not permanent and by the time that the study's data collection was completed, both Sheila's and Nancy's contracts had ended, resulting in redundancy. These conditions of labour were not restricted to apparently peripheral staff (i.e. project workers/instructors). Even at middle management level, Diane, a curriculum manager held a 0.5 appointment, the rest of her full time hours being taken up with a 0.5 advanced teacher post.

While the uncertainty of job security characterised the conditions of labour for many interviewees, the flexibility of FE employment was a common feature in the original recruitment of most participants to the sector. All participants in the sample had originally been employed in FE on a part time basis, often in response to personal requirements to secure flexible working conditions without teaching qualifications.

I wanted a job where I could have some time to spend with the children, but it was also I quite liked the idea of teaching. And when I did the very first class that I did, which was, I still remember, and I went in without any qualifications, apart from my Masters' and my social work qualification, I went in and I could do that and I realised it was something I could do and I could enjoy doing without having any qualifications... (Helen – Learning and Teaching Development Co-ordinator)

This was equally the case with more recent recruits to the sector:

I had always wanted to work with primary schoolchildren but for one reason and another it just didn't work out because when I left university it would've meant taking on a sort of a full time teaching post and studying, which I couldn't do because the kids were small. So, it was an easier route to go into adult education because I could do the part time PGCE... (Heather – Curriculum Development Co-ordinator)

This concurs with the findings of other recent work identifying 'entryism' in FE practitioner recruitment and the continuity of these structures in reinforcing 'flexible and casualised practices in the sector' (Gleeson et al 2005: 450). No participants in my study described FE teaching as their originally chosen occupational route, although many had been working in the sector for many years.

Some participants were uncertain as to whether they were in the right job.

I think you go through phases of thinking you know I never really chose this and maybe I should look for something else, you know. (Chris – Skills for Life Co-ordinator)

Another was on the point of leaving the sector to return to school teaching specifically in response to a worsening of conditions of labour at the site level.

...I have been approached to go back and I'm considering it as we speak... I was talking to a friend who I did work with 20 years ago, and he said that they

were, what they require is a 2nd in maths, and for that I would be paid 31 grand, which is 3 grand more than I'm earning. And no nights, and so, I'm, I went to just look round, nothing particularly formal, but... I think I'll have to give it careful consideration... (Pat – Programme Manager – Learning Support)

As already indicated, individual dispositions to the job were highly significant but were further shaped by the particular conditions of labour determined at the organisational/site level and these changed for most during the course of the study. In Pat's case the balance between dispositional factors, i.e. her preference for the broad and collaborative variety inherent in FE work and the organisational demands for her to teach more hours while continuing to line manage and consolidate a cross college responsibility, was finally tipped and she left FE between the two rounds of data collection. In fact Pat's role at Middleton College became too extended for her to sustain and she indicated that she had left to pursue a more restricted and classroom based professionalism in a secondary school.

In Hoyle's (1974) terms most participants combined teaching roles with collaborative responsibilities, although some resisted certain aspects. Their practice was not usually restricted to classroom performance and they all described aspects of extended professionalism in their accounts. In fact in the sample, flexibility and uncertainty seemed in many cases to underpin collaboration and a necessarily broad range of responsibilities. Several FE teaching staff described an erosion of the classroom autonomy associated with Hoyle's (1974) original 'restricted' model of professionalism. However, for practitioners in the study an extended professionalism did not necessarily offer ideal conditions of labour either.

Flexibility, disposition, position and status

Dispositional and positional factors were highly significant to how practitioners coped with uncertainty and change in the conditions of their labour observed during the research period (May 2003 – April 2005). Staff redundancies and cuts to specific parts of provision in response to changes in funding methodologies, occurred across the sample colleges as did redeployment of staff. For some seeing the organisation as a whole enabled opportunities to practice across departments or faculties and was described in terms of personal pragmatism rather than as a loss of former subject specific identity.

You see I've taught languages for donkeys now and although I love it, there comes a time in your life when you want to do, you either keep doing the same thing till you retire or you look for a new challenge...And that for me was the real creative development, from being a language teacher to taking on a cross college role. That was the new dimension that I was interested in. I would see this as a promotion. (Diane – Learning Mentor/Lecturer)

At Dinsmore College Diane secured a 0.5. management role, while Sheila was made redundant, when the funded project that paid her salary ended. Heather, in picking up some of Sheila's role had to cease to participate in the development work with which she identified most strongly and in her second interview indicated that her conditions of labour were no longer congruent with her dispositional preferences. She was actively seeking another job outside the organisation. Flexible and collaborative (extended) working conditions were underpinned by risk and were reported as commonplace.

Status associated with differentiated contracts was a significant factor in determining conditions of labour for several participants. Heather and Sheila were employed on instructor contracts, although they taught on the same programmes as main grade

lecturers, worked as curriculum developers with main grade lecturers, and both held full teaching qualifications and in Sheila's case a postgraduate degree. Delivering a predominantly HE programme at Southern College, John, Alex, Gail, Geoff, Ian and Jenny also saw their conditions of service as distinct, in terms of their own dispositional preferences to teaching degree and sub degree level courses and the fact that contractually they taught fewer hours than colleagues teaching predominantly on FE programmes. They remained mostly located together in a separate area on the top floor of one of the college buildings, despite a restructuring of HE at the college which had dismantled the HE department and replaced it with vertical subject sections, each with HE programmes at the top. John summarised their distinctness in relation to status and maintaining a physical separateness necessary to protect their conditions of labour.

So, there's different terms and conditions. There's a status problem about, I mean they talk about us being on the third floor, this is sort of the heights of Everest as it were. We don't sway but we're right at the top, I don't think it's deliberate but that's how they see us and you get jokes that when people come up that you haven't seen for a while, the air's rarefied up here and that kind of thing. (John – Senior Lecturer)

Even Jenny whose office space was separately positioned near the HE library was clear that distinctness was not only dispositional and contractually bound but also physically enforced within the institution's sites for practice.

...we still seem to try and keep a sort of feeling of HE as an entity with its separate ambience. By having the separate physical library and area where they study [HE students]...(Jenny – Lecturer)

Nevertheless, John, Alex and Ian reported that their individual sense of professionalism as lecturers was diminished by its location in the FE sector, which they believed generally did not share their HE values and an organisation that prevented them from engaging in authentically HE activities, for example research.

My professionalism there is I suppose, in a way, is a comparative one. In other words I want to be as good as someone teaching in a university who's doing the comparable course to me...I've never felt as though I've been able to read the current journals, current research and so on and felt as though I am on top of the subject. And that, I feel as though that is a lack of professionalism... (Ian – Higher Education Partnership Manager)

Paradoxically, while also certain that opportunities to participate in appropriately extended research activity were restricted by FE conditions of labour (e.g. more teaching hours than colleagues in HEIs), John and Alex aspired to preserve their classroom autonomy and resisted rigorously other organisational initiatives to draw them into collaborative and extended activity, even where it was defined by the organisation as 'research'. This was despite the fact that like Ian, both identified research as essential to an HE professionalism but for them it was incompatible with FE conditions of labour and by the end of the fieldwork neither was engaged in research activities at Southern College. This illustrates how the relationship between dispositional and contextual factors defined individual understanding of professionalism and neatly leads us into the second section of the paper where the relationship between conditions of labour and actual engagement in research activity is explored in greater detail.

Practitioner Research and FE

Participants in the study identified a wide range of activities that they understood as research, from compiling reading lists ('scholarly activity') to PhD level study. Disparate levels of research engagement were apparent across the sample, from no activity at all, to fieldwork being the primary focus of their contracted role. Where organisational involvement was most apparent, college priorities were observed to inform and define much of the available activity and its purpose in relation to practitioners' conditions of labour. This will be explored in some detail later.

Individual practice and research in FE

All five of the originally identified 'research enthusiasts' (James, Meg, Helen, Heather and John) and several participants from the wider sample, identified 'research' opportunities as important to sustaining their dispositional commitment to their work. Like Ian, several participants in the study identified engagement with research with a preferred extended model of professionalism, which was often hard to sustain within their conditions of labour. This was despite the fact that most participants identified engagement in collaborative activity generally as increasingly commonplace within the conditions of their employment. Participation in individual research activity was from the outset largely driven by a personal commitment but also for many linked to their organisational role, although the two rarely coincided completely. When change altered the balance between personal and organisational priorities, it became clear how fragile it had been and further engagement in research activity was often affected. Some examples will help to illustrate the vulnerability of these relationships.

Understandings and dispositions towards research were enmeshed in complex understandings of professionalism, status, personal and career development. Some research project work had been undertaken despite feelings of antipathy towards the policy priorities underpinning it, in order that a personal commitment to an extended professionalism was fulfilled. For example, a project was subverted to fit individual dispositions; James and Pat at Middleton College used LSDA funding for a value added evaluation project to develop a tool to identify at risk students instead. John completed an academic style paper to report on a small-scale intervention rather than the summary evaluation that was required. Several participants described their personal engagement with research as a vehicle for sustaining their professional interest in their work and in this sense individuals perceived their professionalism to be extended, perhaps even legitimised through their engagement with research.

And the project came along, this community project and it lifted me out of that. ..so I'm quite grateful for that because it gave me an opportunity to do something different. And I think it re-enthused my interest in the whole subject area but also in terms of staying in teaching... (Chris – Skills for Life Co-ordinator)

...you could say all the negatives about what it's like but what an opportunity to be able to go down to the AOC, what an opportunity to do all this stuff, and I do wonder if, you know, if I move wherever, would I be bored if I went to something more narrow. (Pat - Programme Manager for Learning Support)

However, research engagement was hard to preserve within uncertain and changing conditions of labour at the sector and site level. Despite significant personal dispositional commitments to research, all key participants' second interviews described a reduction in the amount of research activity compared with their first. Contextual constraints rather than dispositional were often the major factor.

Even for Meg, employed to co-ordinate research, events outside her control had reduced the number of hours available to carry out what she regarded as purely research-focused activity.

I have been in a temporary position as the Head of the unit while we wait for the post to be filled, so that's about taking on more responsibility for line-management and quality control and things like that and some of the networking roles that that person would take on. It's okay, it's a new challenge, which is nice but I miss the research, that what I really enjoy doing. (Meg - Research Co-ordinator)

Of the other four key participants, James had ceased to engage in research once his link with HE had ended on completion of a Master's degree. He had changed job, moved college (by coincidence from Middleton College to Newton College) and no longer believed that he had the opportunity to participate in research. Despite the collaborative and extended professionalism underpinning his new cross college role and his continuing dispositional desire to be involved, there was, in his view, no obvious space for research within his workload.

But it's having the time and energy to do it really, when I first got here I was quite enthusiastic about doing something like that, I did wonder about, you know, PhD or thinking about some sort of paper or whatever. But quite honestly at the minute it's absolutely not something I'm thinking about because the idea of doing anything other than just trying to keep on top of things isn't an option and even if I could persuade somebody to give me a day a week to do that rather than my job, it's not going to get my job done. (James – Cross College Key Skills Co-ordinator)

Other stories were similar in highlighting and imbalance between dispositional preferences towards research and the contextual constraints of reconfigured workloads. John picked up increased responsibility for course development and although this was for HE courses, felt forced to relinquish his research engagement to cope with curriculum planning priorities. A personal and long-term commitment to a PhD had also necessarily been put on hold while curriculum focused priorities were addressed.

Well I'm doing the PhD but it's pressure of work there you see...I've done some stuff in the summer and over Christmas but the pressure of work last year was extremely heavy because we were getting this new degree up and running and I don't like going to my supervisor without something there (John – Senior Lecturer)

Heather had lost what she regarded as the research aspect of her job when LSDA project funding had ended, research as a part of her curriculum college development role disappeared, although to sustain her dispositional commitment it appeared that she was trying to continue to be research active in her own time.

If they really believe in it they'll fund it themselves and it'll be a permanent fixture and I really don't think that will happen, it will be interesting to see if it does but I really don't think it will. With regards to research, I haven't really picked anything up, I'm doing bits of my own. (Heather – Curriculum Development Co-ordinator)

If the opportunity to engage in research within their workloads had diminished or disappeared entirely for these four individuals, for the last key participant the situation

was even worse. Helen's highly individual and to a large extent self created role as college researcher had been identified as no longer an organisational priority and she found herself in a redundancy pool with her job and its clearly stated responsibility for research activity no longer considered to be viable by the organisation.

I seem to have sort of created the job a bit myself because I started it temporarily and then they made it permanent, [laugh] permanent as a year ago. And I obviously in creating it, not creating it, but in the emphasis, I put a lot of emphasis on the research and development part of it and although there is something in the job description about that, I'd made an effort to pursue those lines of enquiries through LSDA projects...either doing it myself, carrying out research myself or encouraging other people to do it. So it's part of the job description but that part of the job will be going. (Helen - Further Education Learning and Teaching Development Co-ordinator)

John suggested that a genuinely academic atmosphere conducive to developing individual research interests was entirely incompatible with FE conditions of labour and organisational priorities of control. At Southern College he believed that a corporate, and fundamentally FE model of research had replaced the individualism and independence of his own engagement with research.

What's happened since is it's become part of the organisation and structure and it's top-down and many of the people who are sitting there haven't got a bloody clue what's being talked about, but they're there because it's part of the incorporation thing. There's a culture of compliance, you cannot have compliant researchers, they've got to ask questions and I will not be part of this culture of compliance.(John – Senior Lecturer)

He was not alone in voicing these concerns and an exploration of organisationally driven research priorities follows in the final section.

Research in FE and organisational priorities

The study revealed that several of the participating organisations had a particular interest in highlighting and embedding their own priorities for research activity within organisational structures and by extension within some practitioners' responsibilities. Two colleges in particular, Dinsmore College and Weston College, described themselves as committed to the dissemination of a range of research material, although there was little evidence of wider practitioner involvement beyond small-scale staff development events and through weekly teaching and learning staff bulletins at Weston College.

Dinsmore College, with a faculty/school set up to develop teaching and learning across the institution, outlined its organisational commitment to 'research' in a lengthy manifesto, which described an institutional level commitment to research activity and the dissemination of wider knowledge, including academic, to support innovation in teaching and learning. Dissemination had, at the time of the first round of data collection, been limited to two events, the first in relation to the college's participation in an HE based learning styles literature review and the second an information session about an HE/FE research project. Some external and internal resources had also been directed towards Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) and Learning and Skills Council (LSC) project work but the priority for the school/faculty's remit was locally funded coaching and mentoring initiatives and teaching staff development in response to unsatisfactory teaching and learning observation grades. The research and development unit at Weston College had

been set up to carry out research and to manage funded action research projects for teaching staff (these were also mostly LSDA and LSC funded projects), again as part of an organisationally stated commitment to improving teaching and learning through an evidence based approach. The unit also evaluated college provision, offered staff development events that included training in research methods, was developing a resource base and published a weekly learning development bulletin, sent out to all teaching staff. The nature of research activities for both colleges appeared to be quite clearly managed by the organisations in relation to college teaching and learning strategies and government priorities.

Project work carried out by the research and development unit at Weston College had to be approved at a senior level and was often shaped by short term funding arrangements i.e. by the sector based organisations funding it. Managers in both colleges acknowledged the possibility that the distinction between innovation in teaching and learning and performance measurement might become blurred in the future. The second round of data indicated that the faculty/school's role at Dinsmore College had developed in this way. Managers and teaching staff indicated that a quality rather than research priority dominated. Practitioner engagement was limited and not usually part of work-loaded responsibility for teachers in both Dinsmore College and Weston College. At Weston College, where a significant amount of project work was managed and where funded time for lecturing staff was available and even encouraged for 'research' project work, it had often been difficult to actually arrange release from teaching responsibilities for staff to participate. Research project fieldwork was usually carried out by contract fieldworkers rather than by FE academic staff.

...actually the practitioner involvement was a really interesting one as well because what we found was, it was very hard to, if you're working to a short timescale, it's almost impossible to use a practitioner for that. Because they simply can't, if you need to do a 100 hours of work and you know that you have to do it now and it has to be done before the end of March, you can't do it because you can't yank people out at a crucial, I mean there's almost no time of the year that isn't crucial, you know, once people are established with their classes. So what really changed was the type of practitioner involvement and we found that what seemed to be working better was where we were able to employ fieldworkers and project workers to work, to do the work that had been devised by the managers and the teachers, ...we kind of gave up on the turn people onto research thing because, you know, people are just far too pressured, it's like yeah very nice but actually here am I, stuck with these groups or this terrible retention problem...(Lorna – Learning Development Manager)

Conditions of labour were a major obstacle to practitioner participation in research even where a dispositional commitment was apparent. Meg, the Research Co-ordinator at Weston College indicated that to ensure lecturer participation in one project running at the time of the second round of data collection, additional payments for teaching staff time had been arranged instead of paid release, i.e. overtime so that the work could be carried out on top of usual work responsibilities. One fieldworker at this site described the shortage of contracted teaching staff had often resulted in lecturers who did participate taking on project work as additional responsibility to full teaching workloads.

Specific difficulties with involving or continuing to involve practitioners in research work were also reported at Dinsmore College, again in relation to conditions of labour i.e. contextual rather than dispositional constraints. Several practitioners were

reported to have chosen to not continue with the HE learning styles research collaboration because no paid remission was available. Funded project work did comprise significant amounts of the workload for some staff (Sheila and Heather) but as funding was short term, when it had run its course the work ceased and wider dissemination was unlikely. By the time of the second round of data collection most interviewees at Dinsmore reported a significant decrease in research and development project activity, superseded by a clear focus on funded ICT initiatives, financial support for advanced tutors to undertake higher degree modules and the extending of existing mentoring and coaching schemes for teaching staff across the organisation. All were organisational rather than individual priorities. More than one interviewee reported that the faculty/school's remit had become increasingly aligned to supporting the college's quality mechanisms, quite different from its original remit.

At the moment, other people will probably say something different but it's the quality observations that are providing its money if you like, because that's the only outcome that it can, that it seems to be doing from my mind. Well I saw it as being a massive school where you could pilot anything, you know, and there'd be LSDA funding flowing in and, you know. It just well, it's just sort of died a death. SMT have got a hold of it now and that's it and because of the change in direction, so it's easier just to go with, you know, no, no, we'll just stick down this path, whatever that path might be. But self-assessment's obviously key and that's it. (Heather – Curriculum Development Co-ordinator)

Diane described the shift in focus for the school as underpinned by research findings but it was not clear how this was disseminated across the organisation.

Well we've always tried to base what we do on academic research, you know, on, so that kind of reinforces what we've all, and if the learning coach team now have Masters', well we do, it's I don't know how many units of credit it is, it kind of gives us academic credibility and it's the kind of reading and research base to justify our practice... The only reason we're advocating change is because we think this is how people learn better and you change your classroom practice not for the sake of it because evidence from research suggests that people will learn better in this particular way. I couldn't do it any other way, I mean there is no other way. (Diane – Curriculum Manager and Advanced Teacher, in first round Learning Mentor/Lecturer)

The other three colleges in the study had less clearly stated organisational objectives with respect to research. Although two of the colleges (Newton College and Southern College) had fairly large HE provisions by FE standards, co-ordinated research activity at these colleges was evident in discourse but difficult to locate.

Newton College had a research-working group that had become largely redundant during the course of the study. Research activity remained additional to HE level teaching responsibilities and was uncoordinated. A failed merger with the local university, a poor inspection result and Helen's redundancy all suggest that research was no longer an organisational priority at Newton College when the fieldwork ended and none of the participants at the college were engaged in research activity of any kind despite their dispositional commitment in the case of James and Helen who was waiting to hear if a role at the college would exist for her at all.

Southern College had initially demonstrated little organisationally driven research activity beyond subscription to subject based academic journals, although an allocation of small amount of research funding had been made available for individual members of staff to bid for during the first round of data collection. This allocation of

project work was subject to senior management approval, as were funded higher degrees for lecturers teaching on HE programmes. Both routes were managed through staff development structures and clearly aimed at supporting college priorities.

I think that research primarily is to benefit the organisation, so we've had people, I'm just thinking of a couple of people, three people in particular, one that did a Masters' on teaching and learning and it was really looking at the impact of initial teacher training within the organisation. Then we had two people that did MBAs and one was really looking at the issues about managing off site, and then another person did a dissertation on management development, training and development for managers and they fed that back into the group during staff development days. (Alan – Staff Development Manager)

By the second round of data collection the situation had changed significantly and new organisational priorities of expanding the HE provision underpinned a directed college interest in research activity. John, who had previously been involved in running externally funded research projects without organisational 'interference', was certain that organisational priorities had transformed the purpose and outputs of research at the college.

...it's not research as I would recognise it, it's basically, it's performativity, something the organisation wants. That's fair enough, they're providing the money, you've got to give a rationale for doing it but they look at research as control. (John – Senior Lecturer second interview)

Southern College's research group was relaunched at the time that the second round of data was being collected, again reflecting an organisationally driven imperative to raise the profile and realign research activity at the college for organisational purposes.

So the structure's trying to impose it's own model on research, quite simply in response to what the QAA said, the people who actually do it and the more sort of enquiring approach, i.e. look at the process, you look at the ambiguity, how you make sense of things like this and put it in some kind of a scheme or a framework, or a theoretical structure, all these kind of things; they don't understand that, you know, they just want statistics, they just want that kind of thing. (John – Senior Lecturer second interview)

Both John and Alex decided not to participate in the new research group as it was regarded as reconstituted in a form controlled by management rather than an authentic HE research forum. For John and Alex the issue was as much about autonomy and professionalism, i.e. their conditions of labour, as it was about their personal dispositions research. The two issues were inseparable in a personal struggle to retain pre incorporation contracts of employment and membership of an HE departmental 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991), which officially had been disbanded in the restructuring of the organisation. New contracts were under discussion, according to Ian's second interview account, to recruit HE lecturing staff to Southern College with an enhanced reduction in teaching hours to accommodate research activity in a broad and unspecified sense. Whether these conditions of employment would be extended to existing HE teaching staff was unclear.

The last of the five colleges, Middleton College, had neither a structurally defined research focused unit nor a significant HE provision in which research discourse might be located but nevertheless managers described a range of LSDA/LSC and DfES projects running in apparently uncoordinated ways. Although funding was being used to release individuals from teaching responsibilities to participate in project work, inconsistencies were reported. Pat, a middle manager received no remission for the second year of a value added research project that continued to draw down LSDA funding. The organisation was happy for her to complete the research in her own time but would not incorporate it into her contracted workload, although they were content for her to represent the organisation in presenting the research to the Association of Colleges and the college's board of governors.

...now there's me with no remission... they do know that I do, you know, SMT know that I do it, and are quite keen that we've got something about value added, but like I say, I don't know whether they think oh that's her role. (Pat – Programme Manager for Learning Support)

In Pat's case it was the lack of an organisational level commitment to research that impacted so negatively upon her participation. As already described in relation to her conditions of labour earlier in this paper, by the time that the second round of data collection had commenced she had left FE altogether to return to a more restricted professionalism in school-teaching, after more than twenty years in the sector.

Conclusions

In all five sample colleges, a strong dispositional commitment to research was critical for practitioners to engage in research activity but the opportunity to fulfil this commitment was further determined by the particular conditions of labour at the sector and the site level. These factors were not constant and while arguably the conditions of labour observed for most participants were never especially 'conducive' to practitioner research, they became significantly worse during the course of the study. For most of the sample with a stated research commitment, their individual research interests under changing conditions of labour became untenable. Nevertheless, 'research activity' as envisaged by several of the organisations was continuing when the fieldwork was completed and in the case of Southern College, Dinsmore College and Weston College was becoming more embedded in organisational structures. The focus and outputs of these organisational developments were disputed by some participants as to whether they constituted research at all and personal and organisational definitions and understandings of research were in conflict in several cases.

Little has been said in this paper about the perceived impact of participants' research activities upon teaching and learning practice. The general 'value' of research for FE and the certainty that it was a 'good thing' was not disputed by participants in the study, despite considerable divergence about its purpose and the focus of its outputs. In many cases a 'what works' instrumentalism underpinned both practitioner and organisational attempts to use research to improve practice and while this has not been the focus of this particular paper, it is perhaps fitting to conclude here with an acknowledgement of practitioners' understandings of how their research activity had directly benefited learners, even though conditions of labour made engagement in such activity so hard to sustain. This was after all at the heart of many participants' dispositional commitment to engage in research.

It should be emphasised that all interviewees who described involvement in specific research activities were extremely positive about the direct effect that they had had

upon targeted groups of learners, as well as on their own professional understanding. Several practitioners were certain of the value of 'research' project work and that the impact of interventions that they had been involved in were real. At Weston College, Meg, Emma and Lorna all described 'hard' outcomes with respect to retention and achievement statistics, in relation to an LSDA funded intervention that allocated additional contact hours to 'at risk' learners. At Dinsmore College, Heather's 'community of enquiry' project aimed at developing deep questioning learning techniques in groups of learners, was reported to have had an impact on learning cultures at the college. At Middleton College, Pat and James' at risk tool successfully identified learners early for additional learning support and combined with other assessment tools was described by both of them as an important research derived enhancement of learning and student centred support for the college. At Southern College, John described his early research projects as instrumental in developing appropriate community provision and Alan was certain that funded research degree work was enhancing practice through staff development events.

Nevertheless, for organisations the short-term nature of funded project work meant that further research or to even sustain initiatives would depend upon a subsequent commitment of resources by the FE institutions themselves. This was widely felt to be unlikely given the increasing lack of flexibility with respect to the main organisational priority of balancing budgets against declining core funding across the sector. At Weston College such difficult decisions had not been necessary as long as the research unit was financially self-sufficient. However, where funding for developments had ended, a 'costed' model of institutional investment of resources against anticipated core funding for success was under development. If college investment in an intervention could be shown to generate achievement funding from learner success unlikely to occur without that intervention and the funding available was in excess of the cost of the intervention, then the 'research' project was a viable proposition. Under these circumstances it seemed clear that organisational priorities were likely to increasingly continue to dominate the 'research' discourse and character of research opportunities at Weston College. As such an approach fits well within the particular conditions of current FE funding methodologies and increasingly interventionist policy making, it could represent a an FE model of 'research', although many participants in this study would have been very uncomfortable with the narrow scope of its purpose and its definition of research.

An alternative approach to developing a FE research culture more aligned to broader understandings of professionalism would certainly need to reconfigure the conditions of labour for FE practitioners, so that extended professionalities in FE might genuinely include opportunities and access to research activity as a matter of course. Reporting the final conclusions of a major longitudinal study into FE, Hodkinson et al (2005)², (citing Fuller and Unwin (2003) and Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2005)), identified significant limitations to FE practitioner professionalism that were rooted in contextual rather than dispositional constraints upon FE teacher professionalities. They recommended that engagement in research may have the potential to extend and expand FE professional learning and practice if included within conditions of labour that explicitly include the processes of research in workloaded responsibilities for individual as well as organisational gain.

This would entail creating more space for tutor autonomy and collaboration, encouraging, rewarding, sustaining and supporting creativity, imagination and innovation, and providing better tutor learning opportunities, including

² Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) Transforming Learning Cultures in FE (TLCFE) project.

challenging expectations and assumptions...Tutors need more expansive learning environments at work, including opportunities to step outside the working context and engage with critical thinking – for example through engagement in research or other HE-linked courses and activities.

(Hodkinson et al 2005)

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Appendix A: Sample table (all organisational and participant names are pseudonyms)

Participant	Job Title/Description	Full Time (FT)/ Part Time (PT)	College
James*	English Lecturer	FT	Middleton College
Harry	English Lecturer (PTHP)	PT	
Barbara	Programme Manager – Humanities and Public Services	FT	
Pat	Programme Manager – Learning Support	FT	
James*	Cross College Co- ordinator – Key Skills	FT	Newton College
Helen	Further Education Learning and Teaching Development Co- ordinator	FT	
Sally	Principal Lecturer	FT	
Jean	0.5 Cross College Key Skills Co-ordinator for Communication/ 0.5 Lecturer in Key Skills	FT	
Anne	Lecturer in Communication Key Skills	FT	
Heather	a) Curriculum Development Co- ordinator/ Learning Coach (first round of data collection) b) Curriculum Development Co- ordinator (second round of data collection)	FT (Two 0.5 posts) FT	
Mandy	Director of Teaching and Learning	FT (Seconded 0.5 to local Lifelong Learning Partnership)	Dinsmore College

Diane	a) Lecturer/Learning Mentor/Learning Coach (round 1 of data collection) b) 0.5 Advanced Tutor/0.5 Curriculum Manager – Community Learning	FT (Two 0.5 posts) FT (Two 0.5 posts)	
Roy	Curriculum Manager - ILT	FT	
Sheila	Curriculum Development Co-ordinator	FT	
Eve	Teaching and Learning Manager	FT	
John	Senior Lecturer	FT	Southern College
Alex	Senior Lecturer	FT	
Ian	Higher Education Partnership Manager	FT	
Gail	Learning Tutor	FT	
Geoff	Lecturer	FT	
Alan	Staff Development Manager	FT	
Jenny	Lecturer	FT	
Lorna	Learning Development Manager	FT	
Meg	Research Co-ordinator	FT	
Emma	Research Project Monitor	PT (Temporary Contract)	
Chris	Skills for Life Co-ordinator	FT	
Nancy	Level 1 Level 2 Project Co-ordinator/ PTHP Lecturer	PT (Temporary Contract)	
David	Project Worker/PTHP Lecturer	PT (Temporary Contract)	
Steve	Assistant Principal for Lifelong Learning and Higher Education	FT	

Key research enthusiast participants are in bold.

***James moved from Middleton College to Newton College in January 2004 i.e. between round 1 and round 2 of data collection.**