Challenging assumptions about values, interests and power in further and higher education partnerships

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Abstract

This article raises questions that challenge assumptions about values, interests and power in further and higher education partnerships. These topics were explored in a series of semi-structured interviews with a sample of Principals and senior higher education partnership managers of colleges spread across a single region in England. The data suggest that common assumptions evident in the literature and professional discourse about the hegemony of higher education institutions in partnerships with further education and sixth form colleges may be misplaced. Questions are also raised about an exclusive focus upon shared values in educational partnerships, and it is suggested that greater clarity about the focus of educational partnerships can explain how successful partnerships can negotiate

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which values and interests are shared and which are not – an approach that can be a useful modus operandi in the increasingly competitive educational markets in which universities and colleges operate.

Key words

Higher education, further education, partnership, leadership, management, values, interests, power

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Introduction and context

The idea for this article has its origins in my cumulative professional knowledge and experience, having spent over twenty years in roles carrying senior and executive responsibility for university partnerships for collaborative provision, outreach and access, and student progression. Most of these partnerships have been with local further education colleges (FECs) and sixth form colleges (SFCs), and that perspective is strongly represented in this article. My starting point is that universities must be clear about the focus of their partnerships, and that partnerships should be an integral part of institutional management strategy and leadership focus. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with an opportunity sample of 14 college principals and senior higher education (HE) partnership managers.

The data show clearly that FECs face many complex and difficult challenges to their continued success and even their existence, including a marked increase in competitiveness between FE colleges, continued diminution of the further education (FE) unit of resource and overall government funding for their 16-19 and employer led work, policy changes to higher education student number controls, and, not least, uncertainty about the direction and character of their partnerships with each other and with higher education. In the absence of collaborative strategic planning of further and higher education partnerships at national or regional level (Parry and Thompson 2002, Scott 2010), analysis of aspects of intra- and inter-organisational

structure can be helpful in understanding and explaining some of the radical

developments and changes taking place in post-compulsory education, especially at

the interface between further and higher education. This paper aims to document

these challenges and changes seen through the lens of college leaders and senior

managers, and arising directly from this awareness to promote clearer understanding

about leadership, management strategy and power relations in FE/HE partnerships.

Perspectives and commentary on the theoretical literature

The phenomenon of partnership is widespread throughout the public and private

sector, and no more so than in the field of education. As Robertson (2009) has noted,

"in today's policy context where the calls for networks, collaboration and community

invbolvement are commonly heard, the concept of partnership has never been more

imoportant" (p.40). Whether the aim is more effective service or project delivery, or

because they are ethically and politically desirable, sustainable partnerships between

education and business (Paton, Chin and Burt 2014), or more broadly cross-sector (Le

Ber and Bronzei 2010) are widely understood to be central to effective leadership and

management. It remains more than ever the case that the concept of partnership has

become the 'mantra of urban policy in the UK' (Taylor, 1998: 173).

There is a well established (eg Ball 1993, Hatcher 1994) inherent tension within

the education field between education as 'providing a market commodity to be

bought and sold, at the same time as being viewed as a public good and a social

utility' (Mitchell and Alexandrou 2011, p.146). Partnership work is no exception in being caught up in this tussle. Jones (2002) has shown how the term collaboration 'seems to offer an alternative set of ideas and activities to those associated with marketisation. It evokes feelings of a post-competitive *zeitgeist* and carries with it the cachet of contemporaneity' (p.166). Institutional partnerships in education can be both progressive and empowering, and in an important way extend and expand the capacity of individual organisations, "harnessing individual academic interests and engaging these in grounded projects of real value to the wider community**….** by-passing the sterility of many traditional approaches to academic work"(Barnes and Phillips 2000, p.184). However, inter-institutional collaboration may be pursued and conducted for a variety of motives, including the 'economic and financial benefits that can now accrue from attracting students from non-traditional backgrounds and low-income groups.... It therefore becomes necessary to ask whether collaboration is sometimes just a polite way of saying "hostile take-over" ' (Jones 2002, p.168). Mulcahy (2004) points out that '(d)iscourses of 'partnership' can be argued to make vocational education and training institutions an agent *of* industry and government rather than a partner *with* them' (p. 185). So although educational partnerships are almost universally viewed as positive and progressive, care should be taken in making such an assumption.

   In a major report for the Higher Education Funding Council of England on indirectly funded partnerships between universities and FE Colleges, Robinson and Hammersley-Fletcher (2006) identify five key criteria as important in promoting successful partnerships: staff interest and ownership of their role; a culture of clear

and open communication; clear messages from senior managers; recognition of the time partnerships require; and clarity and review of quality and standards. It is interesting that the questions of leadership and management strategy do not feature in this list of priorities, neither are these questions represented strongly in the wider theoretical literature on partnerships in post-compulsory education. Connolly, Jones and Jones (2007, p.160) capture the different perspectives of those involved in a collaborative project which implemented an e-learning initiative with higher education and further education institutions in partnership. In reflecting upon what makes collaboration work, they identify 'trust' as one of a number of key elements among environment, management, history, individual experience, process, communication, purpose and resources. In Butcher et al's (2011) analysis of university partnerships with schools and community groups, 'commitment to long-term collaboration in goal setting and to sharing of perspectives, capacities, and resources' was found to be integral to partnerships designed to make a difference. In this study, other forms of partnership that were more transactional in character were found to be necessary for operational reasons, but lacked the capacity to be generative or transformational.

Clegg and McNulty (2002) emphasise the importance of good alignment of aims in their study of the dynamics of partnerships in delivering social inclusion, and avoiding mismatches that may be apparent at either organisational or personal level, or both. Compatible missions have been found to be central to effective partnership (Trim 1994, Kirk 1995). That said, many educational partnerships have been characterised as performative (Mulcahy 2004, Elliott 2012,) or simply transactional or pragmatic in

aspiration and outcome, given that 'a coordinated partnership strategy may be viewed as a calculated risk as the uncertainty involved can be shared equally among the partners in the arrangement' (Trim 2001, p. 188).

Abramson (1996), in a report for HEFCE reviewing higher education located in FE colleges, identifies significant benefits to widening participation as a sustaining force in FE/HE partnerships, extending higher education opportunities to students excluded by geography, class or culture. Sustainability is also key to Dhillon's (2005) analysis, showing that partnerships in post-compulsory education can transcend the level of pragmatic response to education policies that reward collaboration, as long as the networks concerned are 'based on shared values and trust (that) emerge as the glue that holds people together and thus sustains a partnership' (p. 215). In a more current contribution (Dhillon 2013) she highlights 'the importance of norms, values and motivations both for participating organisations and individual leaders and managers in sustaining successful partnerships.' (p. 745). Lumby (1999), in a study of strategic planning in further education, found that preserving and promoting educational values took a central place: 'Despite an acute awareness of financial realities, values, not a competitive position, lay at the root of the choices or lack of them, and may also explain the language and structure of the strategic plans themselves.' (p.78).

A number of scholars (eg Minshall et al 2010; Hwan-Yann Su et al 2011), have noticed that effective partnerships may be endangered by unequal power relations between the parties, an aspect of what Robertson (2009) has described the "culture of dependency that can be created through hierarchical 'one-way' power

relationships in education" (p.39). Unfortunately many studies leave the matter there and omit to acknowledge the dynamic complexities of partnership. Colley et al (2014) invoke the Bordieu's (1993) concept of 'field' to analyse the contested and competitive world of further and higher education partnership, which leads them towards a theory of power imbalance between universities and FE colleges that casts the latter distinctly as a junior, less equal partner, so that '(h)owever egalitarian the approach within the partnership, the power balance typically lies strongly in favour of the HE institution, which retains the 'ownership' of the students, control over funding, imposition of methods of assessment and QA and resources for research' (*ibid*: p.3), though noting that this domination is variable in intensity and impact depending upon institution type and form of collaboration. In support of their view, they cite with approval Doyle (2006), Lea and Simmons (2012) and Leahy (2012), asserting that collaborations between HE and FE 'tend to be piecemeal rather than creating a more collaborative model, and reinforce a hierarchical distinction between "real" HE in universities, and a marginal form offered in FE colleges' (Colley et al 2014: 3). This somewhat unbalanced relationship has been aptly characterised by Scott as following the 'header tank' principle, where 'in times of plenty, whether of student demand or of resources, universities have been happy to export student numbers to local colleges only to reclaim them in less favourable circumstances' (Scott 2009: p. 407).

This thinking behind these assumptions of unequal power relations between FE and HE has always been problematic both in theory and in practice. In terms of theory, it perpetuates the rather simplistic idea that there is something intrinsic to universities that spawns a hegemonic relationship with their college partners. In

practical terms, this dualistic notion breaks down since even under the previous

English funding council methodology for collaborative provision, direct funding of FE

colleges, independently of universities, was not only possible but popular, and

colleges could pick and choose their accrediting partner. And the private awarding

body BTEC / Edexcel was and is a popular choice among FE Colleges for accreditation

of Higher National Certificates and Diplomas. Moreover, under the current Student

Control Number funding methodology, together with the procedures for Foundation

Degree Awarding Powers (FDAP) and the regulatory framework for Higher National

Certificates and Diplomas, FE colleges are eligible to be considered both for direct

funding and to accredit HE qualifications in their own right. At the time of writing four

FE colleges have been granted FDAP.

A second important limitation of much current thinking about power relations

between HE and FE is that accounts frequently assume that those relationships are

relatively fixed and linear, whereas in reality they seem to be more permeable and

multi-faceted, with different foci for different contexts and circumstances. Traditional

business management and organisational theory have frequently characterised intra-

and inter-organisational relationships as characterized by dense tight linkages.

However Karl Weick (1976) exposed the limitations of such a view, when, in his

analysis of educational organisations he critiqued the dominant organisation

theorists' model and replaced it with an analysis of educational organisations that

characterised them as loosely coupled systems. This seems both closer to experienced

reality, and helpful in pointing up a more complex and dynamic relationship between

higher and further education that recognizes the intertwined influences of values, performativity, strategy and agency.

Practitioner perspectives and commentary on partnership in post-compulsory education

In large part, the tensions that are identified in the theoretical literature are played out in the college principals' and senior managers' accounts of their experience of educational partnerships in post-compulsory education. However analysis of these accounts has generated the central idea in this paper that both HE and FE enter into educational partnerships, albeit in a competitive and complex environment, with agency and with eyes open, and see purpose and gain where those relations serve an educational purpose.

The individuals were selected from a diverse range of colleges in one English region. They are either further education college or sixth form college Principals or senior staff with responsibilities relating to collaboration and partnership. The British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines (BERA 2011) were followed throughout the research. Participants gave informed consent in writing, and were given access to the interview data and analysis. More than this, participants have been encouraged to think of themselves as co-creators of the research (Costley et al 2010), helping to identify and reflecting on the benefits and drawbacks of the educational partnerships they have experienced, and encouraged to engage as active

participants in a structured discussion about their current HE partnerships rather than simply as respondents to a list of interview questions.

Many researchers utilising semi-structured interviews have a preference for a coding procedure, such as developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) which marshalls data into convenient categories for analysis. However, along with Nespor and Barylske (1991) and Forsey (2012) we resist its fragmenting, decontextualising tendencies, and have preferred to create more holistic situated portraits of individuals, to 'capture the beliefs, the values, the material conditions and structural forces underpinning the socially patterned behaviour of the person that emerged in the interview' (ibid, p.374). We attempted to make the interviews critically engaged and engaging, exploring themes of partnership and collaborative working within the current post-compulsory educational policy context.

The principal focus of this paper is the range of ways in which partnerships with HE are enacted in further education, in particular how the colleges in the sample interact with each other and with university partners for access, outreach and progression. The primary issues and concerns emerging from the data are set out below and for clarity are discussed under 5 thematic headings: Competition; Progression; Collaborative Provision; Sustainability; and Widening Participation. The paper ends by suggesting that the critical dimensions of values, interests and power in FE/HE partnerships have been largely ignored or misrepresented in the theoretical literature.

Competition and the market in education

One of the strongest concerns to emerge from the participants' description of their relationships with other institutions was the complex business of balancing cooperation and competition, which many saw as an inevitable consequence of government education policy and the resultant constraints that policy placed upon institutions:

> The coalition government have basically adopted a philosophy which is based on competition and encouraging new providers to open up and that has resulted in occasionally duplication of provision, establishment of institutions which perhaps are of lower quality or certainly uncertain quality but the incentive to collaborate is much harder when you are competing overtly with neighbouring institutions. Having said that, the government, DFE are actively promoting collaboration but they are finding it difficult as it is a conflicting agenda of competition and collaboration [SFC 1, Principal, p.2].

Much of the competition between colleges was seen to be occasioned by reductions in government funding levels per student, leading to increased recruitment targets:

It's all about competition. You've got to try quite hard to collaborate, yeah.... Funding is quite tight therefore you need more students and there's more places than students basically so it's competitive [FEC 8, Principal p.17].

Many respondents regarded competition between colleges as part of a wider socio-political shift towards a more competitive society:

Well I think it's the conservative government in the last two or three years, they want a competitive environment. So, you know, I would put it down almost entirely to that. At the end of the day they've created a society or system that competes with one another, so collaboration is all well and good, but it isn't, it isn't how they're progressing education in this country [FEC 11, Senior HE Partnership Manager, p.2].

The influence of government policy on approaches to cooperation and competition was almost universally felt with views reflecting both perceived benefits and drawbacks of increased market freedom:

Soon after the Labour Government came in '97, you know, there was a lot more out there in terms of opportunities to bid for things jointly

and I think that was part, you know, done deliberately to try and get

organisations to collaborate with each other [SFC 2, p.2].

Many indviduals identified varying elements of competition they faced not only

with other FE Colleges but also with their partner universities:

You've got HEIs going into areas they never did. I can't remember the

last time I knew that (University) delivered its own foundation

degree, did it through its partners. It's now offering suites, that must

be a necessity, otherwise they wouldn't be doing it. Other HEIs are

doing similar, so HEIs are developing their areas, they're getting into

much more diversified in their income because they've got cuts [FEC

10, Senior HE Partnership Manager, p.16].

Two Principals picked up directly on the general view that universities sometimes

take their own superiority for granted:

I think the HE world has a very high opinion of itself in relation to FE, if

I'm blunt, which I tend to be, so on the one level of course that's

absolutely right that the HE world should be absolutely precious about

ensuring the quality of anything that's done in its name and that

applies to any university, but there is still a sense in which HE doesn't

always trust FE to do it right. I guess FE's answer to that would be

yeah, and of course we don't necessarily always get it right but hang

on a minute are you so sure that everything that is done in the name

of HE and the universities is as good as it ought to be [FEC1 Principal,

p.6]?

I think there's a sort of pecking order that maybe the Vice-Chancellor

thinks that they're more superior than an FE College Principal and that

sort of comes over [FEC 12 Principal, p.8].

Government education policy was interpreted by most individuals as encouraging a more open market throughout PCE. One Principal was alarmed that the current 'freedoms and flexibilities (meant) the landscape could become very cluttered and confused because it seems to me that academies, UTC's, free schools, can set up almost at the drop of a hat and I think it's sort of like, slight government rhetoric gone a little but mad, because it's unplanned and I think we might find ourselves in 5 years' time looking back thinking how on earth did we allow that to happen [FEC 7, Principal, p4]?

Partnerships for progression

College Principals differed markedly on the extent to which they regarded partnerships as essential or optional, and therefore on the degree of importance they attached to them. This Principal saw partnerships as reinforcing the community focus vision of his college, segmenting the market to avoid duplication:

... within a locality you have to say how do you provide good

coverage that's relevant to your community.... Therefore if you

collaborate and you decide one will do one thing and one will do the

other, it can work for the common good and everyone gains from it.

So it's that balance. There's always a balance between competition

and collaboration. I think that's key [FEC 2 Principal pp. 1-2].

When asked what the key benefits were of a university partnership, a Sixth Form

College Principal replied: 'Well, certainly I think progression of students is probably

the key one' [SFC 2, Principal, p. 5]. Despite the potential for competition for student

numbers locally, partnerships between FE Colleges and universities were similarly

regarded as vital in securing positive progression opportunities for students especially

at the local level:

The key benefits are that we can run stuff which is of HE level and HE

quality here in (town), make it available locally, it provides

progression routes for our own students who want to do their HE on

their doorstep. [FEC 1, Principal, p.6].

Although it is sometimes taken for granted that education professionals will

naturally work with each other in cooperation and collaboration, there was a strong

view amongst the Principal group that progression opportunities in particular form

part of a wider contract that meets business ends as well as educational purposes:

(Partnerships) are business purposes and their interests and our interests to have engagement and progression…. It makes us a stronger organisation, education in understanding, raises our reputation and profile, student progression [FEC 9, Principal p.2].

However for one Principal, HE progression opportunities for FE students were more a characteristic of both institutions' community commitment:

obviously to be able to say that there is a higher education provision with a local university, I think that's, I think that's of value in terms of the, you know, community ownership really of the college and the university and progression opportunities for students [FEC 5, Principal, p.10].

Progression arrangements are also seen as part of a wider strategic alignment between FE colleges and universities, in which shared strategic planning ensures a good fit between lower and higher level provision in an area:

... we ought to do more joint strategic planning, we ought to be in on where universities are thinking of developing because if a university decides it wants to branch into a new area it would be in its interest to talk to the colleges now because we could start growing that market at level 2 and 3 [FEC 7, Principal p.5].

Most respondents identified a strong connection between planned progression pathways and ensuring adequate local provision:

> … providing coherent progression pathways, giving some choice where there's opportunities for different preferences, but in other ways we collaborate to make sure that there is some suitable provision there for the locality [FEC 2, Principal p.2].

For most respondents, progression pathways were clearly a key focus of FE/HE partnerships, ensuring all through progression from levels 2 and 3 (GCSE / A level equivalent) onto higher education courses. For some, the attachment to and with a university at the same time added a status and prestige that came with the association, 'it gives kudos to the institution' [FEC 6, Senior Partnership Manager, p.15]. Some local universities to the colleges in the sample had set up 'Associate College' or other formalised arrangements to mark and promote this attachment, and often the designation carried other benefits such as reduced grade offers to college students for certain HE courses.

Collaborative provision

Many of the colleges in the sample shared collaborative provision with one or more local universities. This Principal shared with others a rationale for FE/HE partnership around creating collaborative provision, so when asked what are the main benefits of an HE partnership, responded :

> Well, clearly to be able to actually talk about and have an HE offer, albeit very limited, but the view was always, the intention was to grow and look at other high level qualifications [FEC 5, Principal p.5].

Another Principal identified a number of benefits arising from its collaborative provision relationship with a local university:

> We can present ourselves as a, being in alliance with the university so it helps, young people, FE type young people think about HE, it's obviously a way of facilitating funding as well, because, because, because it's been difficult to actually get direct HEFCE funding for us. And its enabled some HE to be provided in (city) which, more local, this is what people want and they can do the two years with us and many of them will then do the third year at (University), so it seems to work, that's the positives [FEC 4, Principal p.5].

For some FE Principals and senior managers, it is the less bureaucratic systems of FE that gives it an edge in being able to be more responsive to employers' HE needs:

We can probably be more flexible than universities can. We can turn

things around more quickly. We probably got…we can respond to

employers more quickly. I think universities are changing but they

tend to be a little bit like oil tankers, you can't turn around quite as

quickly as some other of the, and I'm not saying that should be like

but I think we can probably respond more quickly [FEC 11, Senior

Partnership Manager, p.9].

Taking a different position from all other Principals, one seemed to undervalue HE

in FE in light of personal experience:

These are my own personal views as opposed to an educationalist

speaking, okay? I think I want my degree from a higher education

institution. I don't want it from further education. Now, is that my

academic snobbery? Possibly. You know, you want to go to the best

universities [FEC 12, Principal p.15].

Most individuals regarded FE and HE as quite separate and discrete in terms of

their priorities and core markets, however one Principal had a more connected

perspective:

If a university is genuinely a part of that wider skills agenda to do

particularly with a focus on local needs, local employment, local

business and the local economy, then there really ought to be plenty

of opportunities for FE and HE to be part of the same arrangement [FEC 1 Principal, p.5].

However this Principal of a large college with significant HE provision illustrates well the competitive pressures at work in this field:

the work we have done working with the university as our partner in terms of validating the qualifications, that's led to some very successful provision, innovative provision and that's made a big difference. So there's some really innovative strong work in certain areas. In other areas there's tensions and I think that, that tensions probably increasing more going back to what I said where due to competitive pressures if you say drift into some degree markets, it's always historically been the case between FE and HE, it's where that gets complicated [FEC2, Principal, p.7].

Clearly, in a post-compulsory education environment that is competitive, with FE and HE institutions competing for the same (largely locally sourced) students, there will be competing agendas at play, some opportunities, some threats. All respondents appeared to take quite a sanguine view of this interplay between sectors, and were realistic in their assessment of the capacity of particular FE/HE partnerships to support their particular institutional mission and strategy. The most successful partnerships, in terms of generating trust and confidence, seemed to be those that

had created and sustained clarity about purpose and benefits, whilst recognising areas of tension and competition.

Sustainability

In 2012-13, providers of HE were free to set a student tuition fee up to £9000 per annum, dependent upon certain assurances on spending on access and outreach set out in the institutions' Access Agreement, monitored by the Office of Fair Access for Higher Education (OFFA). Many predicted that this would create a competitive market in higher education provision, and that seems to have had some impact on the FE college providers of HE in our sample:

> ... we have a range of partners and there's with some partners issue over fees, where their fees are very high and they don't seem very willing to negotiate on that. Some of the partners again see us as a competitor so are quite restrictive in terms of what they'd be prepared to validate [FEC 3 Senior HE Partnership Manager p.2].

In the same year, government introduced the Student Number Control, that continued and specified a limit on how many full time students each institution could recruit. This led to many HEIs withdrawing from their FE partnerships in order to preserve the maximum level of funding for the HEI which is reflected in the comments of these senior college HE partnership managers:

Some universities have pulled away from a lot of their college partnerships because of wanting to basically keep all their Student Number Control just for their own in house to deliver higher education [FEC 3, Senior HE Partnership Manager p.3].

... most HEIs have pulled away from their FE partners in recent years. And the main reason for that is if they're not hitting…they've got to hit their own…they've got to hit their targets on their own main campus…. So you've seen, well we've seen many universities, HEIs pulling away from partnership because they're struggling [FEC 10 Senior HE Partnership Manager p.2].

However, the OFFA requirement to set and meet access and outreach targets (OFFA 2014) may have pulled HEIs in a different direction, to extend their FE partnerships in order to diversify their student profile:

Other institutions actively sought to increase (their college partnerships) as a way to meet their Student Number Control, a way to actively demonstrate widening participation, which obviously it's required in things such as the Access Agreement. So at individual levels there have been changes and sometimes they are in opposite directions [FEC 3 Senior HE Partnership Manager p3].

Many individuals felt that this more competitive environment allied to the shrinking level of government funding for both 16-19 and employer led provision had led FECs to evaluate carefully the cost-benefit of their HE partnerships:

> I think with the environment that we are in at the moment every institution, every educational institution needs to look at increasing its income or maximising its income and minimising its expenditure and I think those probably are the two driving features of any sort of collaborative partnership.... there's not the money available just to do things because it would be nice [FEC 3, Senior HE Partnership Manager, p. 4].

A linked theme in our data is the impact of the withdrawal of government influence alongside reductions in its funding. Individuals frequently referred to the demise of the Learning and Skills Council and the schemes it funded such as Train to Gain, and the declining influence of the Higher Education Funding Council and the schemes it funded such as AimHigher and the Lifelong Learning Networks, as impacting negatively on partnership activity:

> At the moment there are very few partnerships with other FE colleges, because certainly in the last few years, er, and with the demise of the Learning and Skills Council, then it's become more a competitive field again, as opposed to a collaborative one, so whereas with our previous, our partnerships around delivery of

Train to Gain, or big projects like that, then they have tended to

wither away [FEC 6, Senior HE Partnership Manager, p.1].

A further policy influence on post-compulsory education partnerships has been the opportunity for FE colleges to gain Foundation Degree awarding powers. Previously, FE colleges were reliant upon HEI partners to validate prescribed higher education courses. Under the Further Education and Training Act (DfES 2007) a number of colleges have been successful in their application to award their own Foundation Degrees, removing their reliance on an HE partner:

We have made an application for Foundation Degree awarding

powers which we hope to be successful with, so I would always

rather not work with someone, let's just get on and do it ourselves,

because obviously managing the partnership takes time and effort

and money [FEC 3, Senior HE Partnership Manager p.6].

Leaders of the smaller colleges in the sample placed high value upon building institutional capacity and mutual benefit:

Usually, it's because you can't do everything yourself. I mean in our

case, we're a very small college. So there's a really limited number

of things we can do by ourselves. So partnership could be a way of

delivering more by gaining access to resources, by sharing

experience, expertise, and by giving students other experiences [FEC 8, Principal p.2].

The reflections on partnership identify a number of positive characteristics of strong, valued and sustainable partnerships, that were widely considered to be strategic, productive and in the interests of student learning and well-being:

> If you don't have trust, and trust is founded in values, shared values, or at least you understand your values, then you can't do partnerships... it's all about trust. Trust, collaboration, mutual benefit. [FEC 8, Principal pp.15 and 21].

This reinforces the central importance of leaders', managers' and practitioners' commitment to the underlying values of partnerships in their formation and maintenance:

> I think it's about, it's about being honest. And I think it's about being transparent and I think the people who are undertaking them have to believe in them [FEC 10, Senior HE Partnership Manager, p.3].

The participant perspectives illustrate well the competing pressures that are thrown up by partnership working. Against the natural inclination to be self sufficient stands the opposing thought that partnerships are a way of 'delivering more' (see above). Unsurprisingly perhaps, analysis of the data indicates that, although it is not a

complete pattern, Principals of smaller colleges tended to be more vocal about the

benefits of partnerships for sustainability.

Widening participation

Nearly all of the FE Principals interviewed demonstrated a firm belief in the role of

their institution in making a positive impact upon widening participation. This led

them to reflect upon how partnerships might contribute to this end, indeed for some,

widening participation was to be a significant aim of inter-institutional collaboration:

> So widening your participation has become the language for making
>
> sure that someone who comes from a poorer background, who
>
> hasn't had such advantages through education, stands an equal
>
> chance. And we're all committed to that. Now partnership can help
>
> that... [FEC 8, Principal, p.3].

For this Principal, the increase in competitiveness is likely to have a negative

impact on widening participation:

> .... in terms of widening participation, because it's, because it's
>
> everybody rowing their own boats, because it's everybody fighting
>
> for their own, as they see it, survival, then strategies around
>
> widening participation, what might be best for the individual

students, will just go, just go down the plughole. That's it, end of

story [FEC 6, Senior HE Partnership Manager, p.2].

One Principal was closely involved in both AimHigher and the local Lifelong

Learning Network and although regretting that neither initiative was sustained,

acknowledged that the local university had picked up and continued elements that

had proved effective in access and widening participation:

There was a lot of funds available for widening participation, which

have all disappeared, so I mean, really what (University) are trying to

do now is replace some of that work, through other mechanisms, so,

so there is a broadening and it's just simply trying to work with sort

of Diploma type students to encourage them to think about

university and that's the widening, but they're the sort of kids that

aren't really, they're not expecting to, to carry their education

beyond level 3, many of them, so we've broadened things out a bit,

which I think is very positive [FEC 4, Principal p.5].

Many individuals cited localness and accessibility as key reasons for entering into HE

collaborative provision arrangements. This Principal, when asked what he would like

the college's university partnerships to achieve replied: 'I think we need to continue

to broaden opportunities for students and make sure more students can progress and

can achieve, particularly with a disadvantaged background' (FEC 9, Principal p.9).

Not all Principals shared the view that widening participation was a primary objective for them of FE/HE partnerships:

> I don't think that's the prime purpose, it might be perhaps a little bit more in terms of the university's agenda [FEC 5, Principal, p. 2].

An FE Partnership Manager seems to concur that widening participation was not a primary objective of partnerships *per se*:

> … an unintended consequence of more competition and everybody fighting for their own corner might widen participation, I wouldn't rule it out, but it's not as if it's been planned that way for that purpose [FEC 6, Senior Partnership Manager, p.2].

This Sixth Form College Principal saw WP as one partnership objective among others of equal priority:

> I think that should be one of the factors that would inform an element of partnerships, whether FE/HE or FE/FE but ensuring resources are used as effectively as they can be and improving quality, they are just as important I think as widening participation [SFC 1, Principal, p.2].

This Sixth Form College Principal concurs:

I think that (widening participation) should be a priority; I'm not

sure... I don't think it should be the only priority [SFC 2, Principal,

p.2].

On the other hand, the thoughts of this Principal on the centrality of widening

participation to the partnership agenda were rather more bullish:

(widening participation) would be one of the priorities definitely,

yes, I mean I think there would be a number of them but clearly

that's massive on our agenda that we want to, to be seen to be, a

reachable or an accessible institution for all of our community, so

yes, I mean, it would be well up there in the priorities [FEC 7,

Principal, p.2].

A surprising outcome of this research is that amongst the FE and Sixth Form College

sample, widening participation did not appear to be as high a priority for partnership

work as was expected. For the author, coming to the work from an HE perspective,

how FE/HE partnerships can widen participation was the principal foreshadowed

problem (Malinowski 1922). The potential and capacity of further education for

widening participation in higher education has been extensively documented (Parry

and Thompson 2001, Bridge, Fisher and Webb 2003, Elliott 2003, Scott 2009). And yet

for the SFC/FE sample, this seemed a lower priority than recruiting students, enabling

a higher education offer, and reinforcing the position of the college in its marketplace.

Summary and implications for policy, practice and the theoretical literature

Returning to the matter of power introduced in the earlier discussion of the

theoretical literature, our data suggest a more evenly contested space between HE

and FE than is evident in the power relations theorists' analyses. The Bordieusian view

of the world is of a hierarchical space in which agents – individuals, groups and

institutions – are positioned relative to others in hierarchical orderings and at

different distances from each other, and engaged in struggle over goods and

positions. Although this space is acknowledged to be 'dynamic and shifts over time….

(a)ll are obliged to play in relation to the established logic of the field,

notwithstanding the bounded agency they may bring to their strategies for doing so'

(Colley et al 2014, p.4).

Given the continuing diminution of government funding for FE colleges' learning

and teaching activity at all levels, it seems that well led and managed colleges have as

a result become more independent, autonomous, and powerful, although many

weaker ones have found it necessary to merge with more successful colleges. In a

policy world in which government funding is reduced and colleges look to other

sources of income, including HE, full cost programmes and even real estate, this trend

towards greater autonomy can only grow. Therefore I take issue with a Bordieusian

explanation on the grounds that it pre-casts social relations and interactions in a field

that is shown in this paper to be both more subtle and complex than the dominant

portrayal would suggest. The idea of educational partnerships as loosely-coupled systems has been appropriated to highlight the need to take different values, interests and priorities into account in establishing and taking forward productive educational partnerships. The concept better explains the idea that power in institutional relationships is variably distributed and therefore needs to be analysed in a variety of contexts in addition to sector esteem or status.

Whilst there are no doubt distinctive cultures in FE and HE (Solvason and Elliott 2013), we can agree with Elliott and Gamble (2001, p.195), who maintain that 'if the best of both cultures can be invested in the design, delivery and management of joint academic schemes and courses, then substantially value-added provision should ensue'- as long as the differences are 'acknowledged and used to positive effect' (*ibid*, p.189). This more dynamic and essentially more equal relationship between FE and HE partners appears to be endorsed by Broughton (2005) who advocates ongoing compromise between educational sectors that preserves each's preferred educational interests. In correctly placing student interest at the heart of successful educational partnership, she demonstrates in an Australian context that 'collaborative arrangements must factor in the possible impact on educational and equity aims or the socio-economic and educational advantages of a cross-sectoral partnership will be negatively compromised and marginalized by the distinct but complementary roles and funding regimes attached to universities and TAFEs.' (p. 144). This is a perspective that places educational value at the heart of partnerships, in what Elliott (2013) has characterised as 'leadership of learning'.

The integration of partnership work into management strategy is, of course, the vital element, and it is this element that connects successful partnership work to successful leadership and management. For both HE and FE, without strategic leadership commitment to partnership that is grounded in shared core educational values, partnerships based soley on shared cultural capital may either wither when policy direction makes collaboration less favourable, or when individual stakeholders retire, change jobs, move away etc.

As well as generating shared values and interests, however, successful partnerships must also recognise which values and interests are a core concern of the partnership and which are not. In our sample, the apparent variable commitment to widening participation as a core partnership value or interest will suggest that this is a field in which universities and colleges should carefully negotiate and position themselves, to ensure that the partnership is productive for both sides. In an increasingly competitive market in FE and HE, successful partnerships will be those that can recognise and acknowledge diversity between institutional missions and strategies, whilst zoning clearly those areas of common interest where mutuality arising from shared values can outweigh competitive behaviours.

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