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Dennis, Carol Azumah; Springbett, Octavia and Walker, Lizzie (2020). Further education college leaders: securing the sector's future. *Futures*, 115, article no. 102478.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.futures.2019.102478>

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Journal Pre-proof

Further education college leaders: securing the sector's future

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PII: S0016-3287(19)30340-4

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.102478>

Reference: JFTR 102478

To appear in: *Futures*

Received Date: 11 January 2019

Revised Date: 14 October 2019

Accepted Date: 27 October 2019

Please cite this article as: Azumah Dennis C, Springbett O, Walker L, Further education college leaders: securing the sector's future, *Futures* (2019), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.102478>

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JFTR 102478

Full title

Further education college leaders: securing the sector's future

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Highlights

- three empirically grounded future scenarios provide a resource for exploring what FE is for and what it may become.
- college leaders walk an ethical tightrope between what FE needs as a business and what FE values as a public enterprise.
- ten case studies of FE college leadership teams illustrate a complex ethics, policy and practice nexus.
- FE has a dual ethical purpose to provide opportunities for learners and make a contribution to society.
- FE provides remedial education, opportunity, social mobility, community participation and the skills necessary for worthwhile employment.

Further education leaders: securing the sector's future

This article examines the ways in which actions taken by the leadership teams of further education (FE) colleges in the UK are consistent with leaders' beliefs of the role and value of the sector, exploring the extent to which such actions might bring about desirable futures. The future of the sector has been an ongoing concern for commentators as austerity drives extensive cuts in funding that force leaders to make difficult decisions regarding students, staffing and curriculum. Drawing on interview data from a case study of 10 leadership teams, the article utilises three previously identified scenarios of potential future worlds of education to assess the implications of leadership decisions for colleges.

Our analysis suggests that leaders experience a policy-driven tension between two ethics of survival: survival as a financially viable institution and survival as a representation of the core values of FE. The paper concludes that while leadership actions may contribute to the further political devaluing of the sector and its designation as a labour-market skills provider, some attempts are made to preserve its wider contribution to society, offering a basis for the creation of a more socially just future for FE.

Keywords: further education; leadership and management; FE policy and practice; future scenarios

1. Introduction

This paper draws on a 15-month 'Leadership and Ethics in FE' research project animated by the research question: How do leadership teams in further education (FE) Colleges identify and negotiate ethical challenges. Our exploration required us to identify leaders' perceptions of the role and value of FE and the future they anticipate for the sector. We then compared these perceptions to Facer and Sandford's (2010) empirically grounded scenarios of three potential future worlds of education, considering how the actions that college leaders take are implicated in the arrival of different kinds of future. We then explored their implications for the shape and scope of the sector in the coming years. We work from the principle that an exploration of contemporary values and politics contributes towards our understanding of any future project. This approach is consistent with what Amsler and Facer (2017) refer to as Anticipation Studies. The future is [...] understood as a [...] resource to interpret and come to grips with the complexity, possibilities and precariousness of the present. However, while there has been recent robust discussion about the future of Higher Education (HE) (Király and Géring, 2019) this paper offers a singular contribution towards an empirically grounded discussion of FE futures.

Our exploration takes place within the specific geographical location of the UK, responding to the call to educators to respond creatively to the crises of our age - the intensification and globalisation of capitalist imaginaries and modes of production, the 'datafication' of human relations both of which resonate differently in different institutional contexts across the globe (Amsler and Facer, 2017 p2) The paper

explores our understanding of Further Education and the sector's imagined futures at a particular moment. FE Colleges in the UK are at a crossroads (Hodgson, 2015). The choices made by college leaders and the basis upon which they are made is of considerable importance. We conclude that the quotidian work of leadership teams in meeting the demands of policy and keeping their organisations financially afloat supports the degeneration of those aspects of FE that they prize most highly. However, we take this discussion further through demonstrating that despite these constraints, leaders struggle to preserve what they believe to be the core mission of FE and these actions offer a basis for imagining a brighter future for the sector than is currently expected among commentators as public funding is reduced and the financial pressures on colleges increase.

We first outline the current political circumstances in which college leaders operate, tying this to wider sociotechnical changes that shape education in the 21st century. These changes resonated unexpectedly with Facer and Sandford's (2010) three potential future scenarios for education which we then used as a resource for exploring what leadership teams believe FE is for and what they believe it may become. While there is an emerging body of scholarship reimagining FE futures (Butterby and Collins, 2019; Powell and Jones 2019), we argue our contribution as distinct and original in as much as our empirically grounded analysis provides insight into why college leaders engage in certain actions, discussed in terms of the kinds of future that they help bring about. We also identify instances of leadership work that help to preserve core aspects of the sector and offer recommendations to support leaders in their reimagining.

1.1 Contextualising FE in a global skills economy

FE in the UK is a vast amorphous sector, difficult to define. It serves upwards of 4 million learners of wide-ranging ages, backgrounds and abilities. Maintaining its historical links with vocational training, it has spread to fill the lacuna surrounding while blurring the boundaries between compulsory schooling, HE and professional learning. Like Community Colleges (CC) in the USA, and Tertiary and Further Education (TAFE) in Australia the UK's FE sector is rooted in its local community settings, providing second (sometimes only) chance provision for those who have not successfully achieved the school leaving grades considered 'fundamental to young people's employment and education prospects' (Wolf, 2011, 8). Its scope spans adult and community learning, work-based learning, private sector training and some higher

education. Although its contexts are numerous, the majority of this provision takes place within FE colleges, with which this paper is concerned.

The nature and purpose of FE and its international institutional counterparts (CC and TAFE) is politically linked to the national economy (see, for example, DfE and BIS [2013]), which has resulted in the prioritisation of a skills agenda in curriculum offer. As Biesta (2006, 169) stated, 'today lifelong learning is increasingly understood in terms of the formation of human capital and as an investment in economic development'. Large employers have asserted that the labour force is inadequately equipped to meet their needs (CBI and EDI, 2010). Policy has called for FE provision to respond to this need and become employer-led and employability skills-focussed.

In 2019 the FE sector is in deep financial trouble. The global financial crisis of 2008 gave rise to an age of austerity in which successive governments have cut public spending. This has resulted in severe reductions to adult skills funding, which in 2014 Keep, (2014) projected would cumulatively reach 60 percent by 2018. To cut costs and maximise funding, colleges have reorganised and streamlined curriculum areas, restructured staffing levels through continued redundancies and increased workloads. They have also intensified the sectors reliance on zero-hours and fixed-term contracts. Learner contributions to the cost of education have increased and reductions in state income, together with its attachment to learner achievement, press college leadership teams to prioritise provision that pays, since failing to draw down the maximum funding for each individual in any given year can have serious implications for future funding allowances (Hill, James and Forrest, 2016).

Attempts to reduce public spending have taken place alongside other significant changes in education. The past two decades have seen rapid sociotechnical developments, many of which have been absorbed into education policy and have resulted in a shift in common educational practice, both in terms of curriculum priorities and the methods and resources applied to learning. Massive investment has been made into the technological infrastructure of educational institutions and, as technologies have become entwined with both formal and informal learning, disruptions have occurred in the social and material spaces of education (Facer, 2014) relating to how learning takes place, how knowledge is produced and disseminated (Burden et al, 2016) and what kinds of learning and knowledge hold currency in a global economy (Biesta, 2006; Schleicher, 2012). Substantial bodies of literature have emerged examining the relationship between technological affordance and formal and informal education, for example the use

of mobile smart technologies and social networking platforms for learning, massive open online courses and approaches to theorising learning and technology. It is not the purpose of this paper to examine the nature or value of these technological and social developments, but rather to explore the perceived role and value of further education from the perspective of college leaders as society evolves in conjunction with them.

In engaging in this discussion, the paper draws on empirical data making an original contribution by asking how leadership teams in further education (FE) Colleges identify and negotiate ethical challenges. In the process, we identify college leaders' perceptions of the role and value of FE and the future they anticipate.

2 Methodology: a phenomenological analysis

The paper draws on empirical research conducted over a period of 15 months during 2015-16 which aimed to explore ethics and college leadership. To recruit participating colleges the research team sent letters to all (209) FE colleges in the UK, excluding Northern Ireland. This included 207 general FE colleges and 2 specialist arts and craft-based colleges. We explained the purpose of the research: *to explore the leadership, ethics and policy nexus* and invited their participation. We deliberately avoided substantial sections of FE (here defined as any form of post-compulsory education apart from universities) such as adult or community education institutions, sixth form colleges, land-based colleges and training providers to ensure the final sample had some semblance of homogeneity. This allowed us to explore a particular phenomenon, the intersection between leadership, ethics and policy while holding a degree of relevance and personal significance for research participants. Those who participated were self-selecting in as much as they had i) the consent of the college's entire leadership team ii) college and curriculum management team meetings scheduled for the limited dates the research team were able to visit iii) felt able to host a team of researchers as participant observers.

Our final sample included two specialist colleges in arts or disabilities, two Welsh, one Scottish and four rural colleges; one college was in the earliest stages of merger; two colleges had recent experience of extensive cuts to provision. All the colleges were in the aftermath of substantial restructuring due to budget restrictions. Three of the UKs four home international countries were included (sample did not

include a college in Northern Ireland) and all UK regions were represented. One Dutch college – purposefully selected - provided a slightly broadened international perspective. While the research participants were overwhelmingly though not exclusively based in the UK, the issues explored –future scenarios, ethics, leadership and the tensions experienced within the research, policy and practice nexus – have international resonance. As such our discussion is firmly situated within what Kenway and Fahey (2009) refer to as the global research imagination. The context for our discussion is primarily the UK. The concerns raised – ethics, leadership, future scenarios, policy and the complex tensions between them, resonate internationally. FE in the UK as therefore an illustrative case-in-point of one instance of how this nexus takes shape.

The data generated by the project included interviews with 25 college leaders, (22 individual interviews and one group interview with three senior managers.)¹ The interviews allowed participants to offer a first-person account of their experiences – rich and detailed (Noon 2018). Observation of 16 team meetings and discussion with 12 focus groups. All the data were transcribed verbatim. Once transcribed we drew the data together in the form of 10 case studies of participating colleges. This allowed us to appreciate each college as a discrete entity. We then returned to the transcribed interviews and focus group discussions which were subject to a thematic analysis using a phenomenological approach that attempted to understand participants' perceptions and experiences of the leadership, ethics and policy nexus in their work. We listened to the audio recordings and read and re-read the transcripts, using our research question 'How do leadership teams in FE identify and negotiate ethical challenges' as an orienting device. The thematic codes generated were then abstracted and categories related to each other. A schedule of 75 different codes were subsumed into 11 headers. Despite the quasi-positivist yearning this parsing of the data implies, we view data analysis holistically as an extended dialogue between ourselves as researchers, our data and our research participants (Usher, 1996). Our approach broadly associated with interpretative phenomenological analysis involved scuttling between heated conversations, codes, memos, analytical cul-de-sacs and divergent story lines while searching for an overarching narrative.

¹ The interview schedule is attached in appendix 1.

Theoretical futures for education as a resource for exploring the leadership, ethics and policy nexus

An immediate answer to our exploration was located within what leaders saw as FE's continued purpose and anticipated future. Facer and Sandford's (2010) theoretical futures for education, crafted as part of the Beyond Current Horizons programme commissioned in 2007 by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, seemed to cohere with themes that emerged through the data.

Education is an inescapably future oriented project, premised on bringing to fruition imaginariesthe world we want to live in and thow we want to live in it (Amsler and Facer, 2017). College leaders made frequent reference to time and continuity.

Next year is our 125th anniversary as a college and we need to be here another 125 years, so I've just got to make sure that our college continues providing what [our county] needs to ensure that happens.

College leader C1N

Educational leaders and policy scribes are involved in a struggle for the future tense, each have competing views about desirable future worlds and the role education plays in creating it.

The Beyond Current Horizons programme was a particularly apt framework to work within because it set out to explore:

...what society might look like in 2025 in order to anticipate the demands that will be placed on the UK education system, taking as a focus not 'the future' in its entirety, but specifically the intersection between technological, educational and social futures.

(Facer and Sandford, 2010, 76)

It offered a valuable heuristic for making sense of our data. The Beyond Current Horizons (BCH) programme brought together more than 100 researchers from diverse disciplines with over 130 organisations from industry, education, policy and research fields to support long-term education design and curriculum planning. Using a scenario-based approach common in futures research, Facer and Sandford (2010) outlined three plausible 'future worlds' for education, each offering two potential

directions. Futures research can feel speculative rather than theoretically or empirically grounded. The future oriented scenarios which emerged from Facer and Sandford (2010) research, were founded upon 84 literature reviews over five 'challenge areas' identified by the project expert advisory group, eight technical trends that were considered to offer potential resources for sociocultural and socioeconomic change, and consultation with the technology and education sectors – including policy and industry figures, parents, learners and educators. The scenarios were then structured around 'predetermined elements' and 'critical uncertainties' (81): those aspects that were considered common in all potential futures and those that might alter sociotechnical development towards profoundly different futures.

The resulting future three world scenarios are as follows:

World I: A highly individualized world of contingent and shifting allegiances in which there is no support for collective responses to social problems, and in which individuals are free/required to take high levels of personal responsibility for their actions.

(Facer and Sandford, 2010, 82)

Two potential education systems emerge in this world. The first sees learners making *informed choice* about education structured around individual need. Learning is accessed from multiple and varied sources, and the journey undertaken in collaboration with paid mentors. In the second, the learner is an *independent consumer* choosing from 'a complex menu of standardised provision from private, public and not for profit sectors' (83).

World II: A world where relationships between people and the groups they belong to are managed by contracts, where rewards and benefits are achieved in response to contributions and where personal reputations are carefully managed within their employment/community/ religious groups associations.

(Facer and Sandford, 2010, 83)

In this world, the burden of responsibility is placed on individuals to find their position in these groups. This could result in an education of *discovery* where education helps learners to identify where they might most effectively contribute socially and economically or an education of *diagnosis* where institutions identify learners' suitability for various economic roles.

World III: A world organized around a collective understanding of interdependence between people, between individuals and machines, between individuals and ecosystems, in which the concepts of 'identity', benefit and action are understood as profoundly social. (Facer and Sandford, 2010, 83)

Such a world might see education as an *integrated experience* indistinguishable from society, community and the economy in which learning occurs through social participation, or as a process of *service and citizenship* where education is separate from society and the skills and knowledge required for social participation are taught explicitly in educational establishments.

These divergent scenarios are used in this paper as a framework in which to analyse the kinds of future college leaders anticipate for the sector, the factors that might aid or hinder those paths and the actions they have taken to facilitate the arrival of or guard against such futures.

4 Findings: Mission, expectation and action

4.1 What is FE for?

We identified two definitions of the purposes of FE from the leadership data:

- (1) To provide opportunities for the development of individual learners; and
- (2) To make an active contribution to society.

The individual development of learners was deemed to be the primary function of the sector and consisted of three parts. College leaders believed that FE assists learners to develop in terms of *socialisation*: that is, the ability to fulfil work and community roles such as employee, colleague, parent or citizen. They felt that FE contributes to learners' *acquisition of specific competencies* for employment, meaning the skills and knowledge required for particular job roles. They also considered that FE plays a role in learners' development of *agency*, defined as a belief in oneself and ability to take action.

It's getting the best potential out of the students ... it's about their progressions and getting them ready for employment or higher education ... It's about student success, getting them to achieve to the best of their potential and getting them out into the world of work ultimately ... As much as it's about their academic success it's about their social skills and building their resilience and becoming adults really ... It is them taking responsibility for themselves.

College leader 2M

College leaders felt that their duty as leaders extended beyond learners into wider society. Viewing the college as part of the local community, they carried a responsibility to reduce social inequity, defend the rights of community members and provide equality of access to learning and social mobility.

But actually we are really really about turning things around, FE – that is our strength. We are really about developing skills ... and about a lot of activity around supporting people where school didn't work for them, for whatever reason, and developing them back into people that are then going to go and get a job and contribute to society ... And I will argue to whoever I need to argue about to try and keep that happening really.

College leader 4D

This relationship with communities and society was felt to be undervalued in current skills policy:

If you read the policies, it's all highly plausible, and highly doable and very aspirational. But the real day-to-day stuff they don't see. They don't see broken society, and we deal with that all of the time in FE. You deal with bits of broken society and kids that are coming out of third and fourth generation unemployment ... When you come to an area like this, and you see and hear some of things that I have to see and hear, it makes me very angry. Very angry about politicians who never see it. And don't know about it, or don't want to know about it.

College leader 6G

The college leaders understood that without opportunities to participate, learners may be trapped in their existing social world, which was felt to be a negative place for many learners, full of deprivation, poverty, unemployment and low aspiration. They felt that FE positively influences people's lives, and that leaders share their responsibilities to the community with other actors, for example employers and public sector services. Education, and learning, in college was seen to be entwined with life chances and not limited to skills acquisition and employment.

The data are replete with ethical convictions which echo the values statement quoted above. Each statement in its own way points to the core ethical mission of FE of providing opportunities to learners and making a difference to society

FE has always managed to help some of the most vulnerable people in our society, so when everyone else has failed - our safety net somehow, for some people not all young people, we have been able to make a difference.

College Leader C1N

4.2 What kinds of future do FE leaders anticipate?

The college leaders felt that they had responded well to funding cuts in recent years, improving efficiency while retaining their core belief in the value of FE. They were therefore optimistic about the future of the sector. The area reviews had been identified as opportunities for growth, for reduction of duplicated provision within regions and as validation of success. The leaders of large successful colleges felt little risk to their institutions, and those who were considering or had undergone mergers felt that it was the best solution for the community, the region and the students. Continually changing policies – although challenging to implement – were not perceived as threatening. For example, in response to a potential funding restriction on the third year of a programme, one leader questioned the significance of the impact on learners:

[E]verybody at the moment that goes into work, imagine bringing that back a year so they're in college a year less, but then go into an apprenticeship as opposed to straight into a permanent role. So, I think it could look quite different like that, that it would be far more route-oriented, but then what about those young people who have reached their full potential academically, you know, we'd still be getting them into sustainable employment.

College leader 1N

The anticipated future was not radically different to the present, with leaders believing that employers will continue to request assistance from colleges to implement new policies. They had formed good links with employers and local systems leadership and were confident that the Principal would retain a voice in regional strategic planning. Devolution prospects were more uncertain – they were unable to predict how funds would be allocated – but they were collaborating with other organisations to produce evidence on regional output, arguing that together they remained best placed to meet the skills need in the area.

The reality of performing a leadership role may mean:

...the higher you move in the chain of a thing, the further you move away from the reason you were in it in the first place...

College leader 4D

But college leaders held onto those reasons for being there. They found it difficult to imagine reaching a point where they would resign their position. Some could not see this transpiring under any circumstance, and others felt that such a point would only come if FE were no longer able to deliver what it should. No leaders predicted that to happen:

I suppose there could be some barmy future world where this has become so far removed from the learner that I felt personally that it wasn't why I got into education and FE in particular ... that it made me feel that disaffected by it that I would resign, but I can't imagine a world where that would happen.

College leader 4D

They believed that FE would endure because policymakers must eventually realise that no more could be cut. The college leaders had accepted the consequences of past wastage, but projected that funding cuts would stabilise because colleges would have become efficient.

I think they realised that they have pushed FE too far ... I think they've realised the damage that they have done, and if they do any more damage, you know, FE would have just crumbled. So, in terms of where we are and what the future is looking like, it's going to be tough, and it will be a challenge to take forward, but ... I can't think of anything that would make me want to quit because, I believe in it, and I believe that the young people and the adults that we serve deserve to have us so you know, I'd fight to the bitter end!

College leader 5B

The college leaders considered themselves problem solvers; 'fixers' (college leader 2M). Where policy was felt to push some learners aside, these leaders bent it to meet their needs. For example, despite the added complexity of managing separate funding streams, college 6G ran intergenerational classes and college 1N identified more 'appropriate' programmes for older learners studying at the same level as those much younger. Many of the colleges in this sample ran some programmes at a loss and intended to continue doing so until they could no longer cover the costs, in the belief that funding cuts would not continue indefinitely and that the sector's finances would stabilise.

I do think that we are required and therefore what we have to do is just make sure that we shape ourselves into a form that still allows FE, so it is down to us ... if we believe in it then we have to find a way of making it survive.

College leader 5B

4.3 *What actions do leadership take in order to create a future for FE?*

The day-to-day work of these college leaders was therefore concerned with enabling their institutions to survive during a time of austerity, yet still provide those things that they believed FE to stand for even as funding reductions forced cuts to staffing and provision.

4.3.1 *Survival of the business*

Surviving as a viable business enterprise governed the daily tasks of the leadership teams. This is the everyday 'banality' (Dennis, Springbett and Walker, 2016) of meeting targets, streamlining the organisation, minimising waste and demonstrating consistently high performance. These are the things without which the organisation cannot survive.

Leaders spent their time securing funding and growing or altering the curriculum to ensure that they could continue to claim funding. This meant scouring performance data for any instances where they could demonstrably improve – where they might increase attendance, identify students at risk of abandoning their qualification, or use staff time more fully. Senior leadership meetings were dominated by presentation and discussion of statistics.

I administer a lot of the quality assurance processes, ... provide those curriculum teams with live performance data on how we are operating on a day to day basis ... to make sure we are not going adrift with attendance or retention or student satisfaction or anything like that, but it is also used right down at a local level for performance management of individual courses and students...

College leader 4D

Dwindling funding and increased competition from other providers meant becoming more attractive to prospective customers. They felt they needed to 'buck the trend' and 'brand' themselves, offering 'extras', such as the opportunity to work with professional athletes, national sports coaches, celebrity chefs and salon owners (College 2M). They identified growth opportunities: making links with new employers, creating bespoke centres for priority subjects and discussing how to recruit more high-performing students. Staff were brought in line with organisational goals to improve learner achievement. Organisation restructures provided opportunities to shed underperforming staff, although valued staff were also lost. This was a difficult, but necessary, process and leaders felt that they had handled it well.

As a result of their actions, the colleges were considered ‘healthy’, more efficient, more streamlined and leaders believed that they would continue to improve their efficiency. The quality was thought to be higher; learners happier and achieving better outcomes than previously. Leaders justified decisions such as instituting zero hour contracts as the ‘right thing’ to do by demonstrating improvement with statistical evidence.

While these actions were taken to ensure financial survival, they may contribute to a future FE that resembles elements of Facer and Sandford’s (2010) World I – a world where education is a consumer product – and World II – in which learners are perceived to contribute to an economic society and are duly rewarded for their efforts. Leaders might perceive their efforts to cut costs and raise the colleges’ competitive edge as good business sense, but in doing so they reduce choices for learners, relocate the responsibility for success onto them and lessen the level of support provided, while actively recruiting higher-performing students. Such things lie at odds with the leaders’ espoused values of equality of access, second-chance provision, social mobility and the development of agency. As stated by college leaders 4D and 6G, FE operates in communities with high levels of disadvantage and low aspiration. It is arguable that this kind of action does not assist in a mission of ‘turning things around’ (college leader 4D), but instead narrows the options for advancement. But leaders felt that, together, such actions constituted ‘playing the game’, which was thought to be key to survival of the business in a time of ‘bombs going off all around us’ (College leader 6G).

4.3.2 *Survival of FE*

But ‘playing the game’ was not the only concern for these leaders. Although, in line with the policy agenda, FE’s ultimate purpose was understood to be about providing skills, the participants maintained that as leaders in education they were also charged with protecting FE’s contribution to society.

The college leaders looked for alternative funding for provision not supported by government. For example, College 1N was investigating the feasibility of offering full-cost language courses to employers and using that revenue to address the locally identified need of ESOL for parents’ evening. Viewing the needs of their students and the community in more holistic terms, another specialist college combined FE income with charitable and health funds to enable them to

...morph from purely being a college to a sort of broader institution that supports people with disabilities.

College leader 3P

Despite concerns about funding, these colleges offered a substantive amount of unfunded provision. College 1N, for example, accepted students who had been excluded from their previous institution for poor behaviour or performance. They took those with high support needs and those with chaotic lifestyles. Their interventions were not always successful, but the leaders asserted that they would continue to try because if they did not, no-one would. These students may not contribute to institutional performance as easily as others, but were considered equally important:

We haemorrhage money in [the] Academy but we do what's right because those 35 students would all be NEET. At the end of their two years with us last year, no we didn't hit the floor target, we didn't get one of them through five A* to C including English and maths but we never predicted that we would. But 100% of them have progressed into FE ... So for us, doing what's right, it's costing us money and we don't have to do it but for [the town], who has the bottom four in five A* to C GCSE results in the country, we have the highest NEET problem, why would we not do it ... because the backgrounds and the baggage that these kids have means that if we didn't, where would they go?

College leader 2M

The college leaders tried to ensure some measure of emotional fulfilment for students. Some colleges rejected disreputable employers, refusing to support a low-wage economy and wanting 'meaningful, not menial' jobs for their students (college leader 3P). Several colleges created 'a great interface with the real world' (college leader 9P) by organising work experience opportunities for students:

It's about them having the experience of work so that they are good citizens and ready to go into the workplace, whatever that might be, because people come here in order to get somewhere – we're not a destination, we're here to help them on the route ... we've looked really broadly about what would give a young person then that experience to be able to go into work. So, last week we had students who took over for a day, maintaining the fire brigade fleet in [the county]. A complex needs school down the road - one of them was head teacher for the day and the others all taught in classes and our sports students went down and did sports with young people with learning difficulties.

College leader 1N

The leaders placed expectations on local employers to become more involved with their workforce's learning. Some issued a direct challenge to employers to participate through local media. Others asked

that apprenticeships be part of employers' strategic planning. Some colleges had successful industry advisory boards for specific employment sectors and others planned to institute these and embed employers in their curriculum planning process. One Dutch leader described how they created their curriculum and final assessments in conjunction with industry experts. Students served internships, working on real projects for employers, acquiring team-work and problem-solving skills while developing their subject knowledge. For all the colleges, skills were deemed only part of a broader picture of individual success.

These actions lend themselves to the more socially just world of equality and opportunity described in Facer and Sandford's (2010) future World III. In this world, society and its members are seen as symbiotic, succeeding or failing together. These leaders seek and find ways to fund what they believe is needed, despite the costs to the financial security of their institutions.

5 Discussion

There is a continual policy-driven tension between meeting the needs of the business and upholding the values of FE. The constant focus on measurement means that risk taking and innovation is often discouraged as teaching practice becomes progressively standardised, giving rise to reductive ontologies of best practice and outstanding teaching (see, for example, Ofsted [2012] and Coffield and Edward [2009]). Cuts in revenue and linking funding to achievement rates force competition between curricular subjects and oblige leadership teams to choose between 'improving the skills at the higher end', which draws down funding, or 'rescuing at the bottom end' (college leader 4D), which may arguably benefit the local community more. Learning provision has been reduced or changed to reflect priority areas and, with funding restrictions on adult learning and higher education (see, for example Fletcher [2011]), students are being pushed to decide which direction their lives will take earlier. Providing learning for learning's sake is no longer affordable.

Policy demands leadership that is efficient and effective and that performs against policy measures. It forces a preoccupation with sometimes impossible targets, for example the achievement of English/maths GCSE in one year that is unrealistic for some students and potentially discourages them from participation in learning by setting them up to fail (Allan, 2017). Much of the battle to protect FE is lost in the day-to-day work, where leaders are concerned with the immediacy of finance and the

appearance of improvement. Education practices are pushed towards ticking boxes, reducing the complexity of the skill and knowledge interactions required for occupational competence to a simplified form that separates skill from practice, privileges the quantifiable and excludes personal, social and soft skill development.

Area reviews of regional need have resulted in fewer, larger colleges whose 'local' community consequently expands to cover vast geographical areas. Curriculum offer is driven by employer skills needs (Gleeson et al, 2015), but community enhancement cannot really be realised if meeting the skills need is directed solely at existing employers in the area. There are instances where these college leaders envisaged the businesses they hoped would relocate to the region and which industries they wanted to see grow, but employers have little incentive to move into an area if the skills needs are not present. This may cause business in the area to stagnate, leading to problems for the community when a major employer closes down or relocates, such as happened for College 2M's community and which required substantial public funds to help manage the fallout.

If the sector is to survive both in terms of its values and as viable businesses, college leaders cannot afford to keep 'playing the game' (college leader 6G) in this way. Ultimately, these leaders felt that the business had to take precedence and that meant assuming whatever form necessary in this policy climate to continue to exist. But while college leaders may cling to the hope that the core values of FE will persist if they successfully navigate the current storm, they are at the same time shaping the sector into something different. The current policy trajectory suggests that FE will become solely a provider of industry skills and that state funding will be reserved for those that can succeed against a narrowly conceptualised version of achievement. Returning to the future worlds scenarios of Facer and Sandford (2010), current policy lends itself to the 'independent-consumer' (83) of Future World I. In this scenario, education is learner-centred, but assigns high levels of personal responsibility to the learner. If colleges cannot deliver these responsible workers, state funding and learner contributions will be directed elsewhere. Education institutions may offer an employer-led menu for consumers, but employers may choose to leave the area. Colleges must be competitive, attract the best learners and provide the best opportunities because their existence is not protected as education spreads beyond the walls of formal institutions. Aspects of Future World II also resonate with current funding policy: rewards and benefits are attached to those learners that follow the party line, take the right subjects and fill the skills gaps.

Colleges currently engage in both 'discovery' and 'diagnosis' (Facer and Sandford, 2010, 83) activities with students: initial advice and guidance and recruitment procedures attempt to match individual learners to programmes and future employment opportunities. But they also try to encourage learners to find a place that they fit, and that will meet their needs and aspirations. Those learners who do not fit the policy narrative in the expected ways are likely to be excluded. In bowing to policy demands, cutting staff and curricula and focussing attention on quantifiable evidence, college leaders are complicit in bringing this kind of future about.

If policy continues on the current path, it is likely to lead to a more polarised society, where there may not be enough high reward jobs for all workers. Facer and Sandford (2010) describe a future led by large corporations where responsibility and autonomy are given to the few, while the many operate according to prescribed scripts and regulations. FE institutions have the potential to address this and in some ways they are already attempting to do so. In protecting what they feel is good about FE, college leaders are endeavouring to create a place in a system that more closely resembles Future World III. They take the connections between education, society, community and economic welfare seriously. They actively identify opportunities for learners to participate in work experience days, work placements and leisure activities. Some of this is explicitly taught through a focus on the skills and behaviours needed for work and social participation - for example, respect for others and appropriate language and dress – and some is provided in the college environment, such as sports academies, lunchtime support groups and links with community organisations. Therefore, while the majority of leadership time is spent weathering the policy storm, these data do hint at positive directions that colleges might move in. Potentially constructive change exists in the secondary, somewhat isolated, attempts to preserve the FE ethos while bending to policy demand.

5.1 Possibilities for future action

The data suggest several ways in which college leaders are currently attempting to preserve this ethos, and which could build upon to strengthen those aspects of FE that the leaders believed characterise its purpose: those relationships with learner, community and society.

Colleges could become more entwined with their community employers and start to engage them more fully in curriculum development, as has been demonstrated fruitfully in the curriculum

advisory boards of College C2M. They could share more industry training with experts from those industries, inviting them to participate in assessment design as has been successful with the Dutch college. They could share more of the responsibility and cost for upskilling the labour market in the local area with the businesses that benefit from it.

College leaders could build on instances of cooperative and collaborative work among the ‘systems leadership’ and work with local authorities, universities and employers in the region to construct the community they want. Acting collectively may enable them to resist inappropriate and damaging policy directions, and help them make contingency plans to ensure the continuation of FE. An advantage of the area review is that colleges have become bigger, and may now be able to take on a more powerful voice with the potential to be heard at government level. Where, previously, acting together was seen as trying to ‘herd cats’ (college leader 7F), the reduction of the number of colleges in one region from 43 to 13 has enabled the leaders of those institutions to sit together around a table and find agreement. They now view themselves to be of equal status with the universities in the region, and feel they may now influence economic development in the area.

College leaders could explore new ways of doing things, looking to the past to identify ‘what hasn’t been tried yet’ (college leader 1N). They could make better use of teaching and subject expertise from within the staff body to combine disciplines and create new ways of producing knowledge and learning. This has been effective at College 7F, who brought students together from make-up artistry and construction and from sports science and bricklaying to bring life to some core curricular concepts. College 9P have brought the creative industries within their walls by setting up a print shop on-site to give students real-world experience. College 1N provide students with varied work experience days to help them link theory and practice. These actions merge college life with other social spheres, breaking down the barriers caused by narrow policy stipulations.

These instances occur in leadership work despite policy constraints that compel college leaders to prioritise chasing performance data. It seems, then, that college leaders are able to make inroads into actively preserving the core values of FE during a period of adverse policy. The challenge for these leaders is to build on these areas and resist the tacit belief that the future will be better if they continue acting as they are: that policy will change; that cuts will cease in response to their streamlining and efficiency measures. It might be prudent instead to begin imagining that the future might not be as positive – that

they are complicit in enabling funding to be cut by offering the provision unfunded because, while it meets short term needs, it is unsustainable and does nothing to secure a long term future where FE still represents what they believe it should. It might be practical to imagine a future where funding does not stabilise; where cuts continue; and where there is more competition for resources, not less. They might imagine a future where the ontology of the institution becomes radically different: a future where learning becomes increasingly informal, outside of the protective belt of formal institutions; where knowledge is produced collectively, democratically, among self-sustaining networks; and where the role of colleges is narrowed to labour-market upskilling. They might consider a future where massive merged colleges are spread across vast geographical areas, with depleted links to the local community, and where local colleges are no longer considered 'part of the answer' (college leader 4D) because employers can meet their skills needs elsewhere – the rise of global networks, distance working possibilities and the technological automation of tasks placing limitations on the job roles that can only be performed by people on a local level. College leaders can then use these future imaginaries to carve out a protected space for FE.

6 Conclusion: Bringing about a chosen future

The current government's thinking is simply this: FE colleges are there to supply skills to close the productivity gap for economic development. If that is the way people think of us, then we'll be funded to do only that. What gets lost is the concept of education, and that concept of learning for learning's sake; learning because actually it's enriching and rewarding and changes your life. Learning because it gives you a set of skills in terms of character development that makes you resilient and allows you to be successful in all aspects of your life; whether it's being a good parent, or a neighbour, or a friend.

College leader 6G

Perhaps the practices of leadership to salvage and grow their business enterprises *enable* policymakers to continue cutting funding and restrict the officially sanctioned remit of FE to its role in developing skills. In acquiescing to policy demands, leaders help to create the conditions that are imposed on them and are therefore complicit in reshaping FE into a narrowly defined labour-market service. Their steadfast commitment to learners and the sector may have the effect of contributing to the continued squeezing of individual growth and opportunity. These leaders attempt to uphold FE values, but by fitting them around the edges of what they can fund it may only encourage policymakers to ignore the value and importance of FE. The research may serve as a cautionary tale for college leaders who are overly compliant

with policy demands.

Silver, in the foreword to the report *'New blood: The thinking and approaches of new leaders in the FE and skills market'* (2016) references leaders caught up in the 'turbulence' of policy demands with little time to think about the broader picture. These college leaders are, in small ways, thinking about the broader issues despite the time constraints and competing priorities. We suggest that colleges would be well served to protect space for thinking, to allocate time to consider developments in the sector and government policy. The sector is disadvantaged by policymakers who see its value only as handmaiden to the national economy. But these leaders assert that college is not about failure or remedial education, but about opportunity, social mobility and social participation as well as jobs. This study, inspired by anticipation studies, offers an original interrogation of the complexity and possibilities of the present – and what it leads to - through an engagement with ideas about the future. Our study has led us to conclude that when college leaders think about (rather than rationalise) what they are doing, they are better placed to develop alternative ways of responding to the pressures of policy. Without thinking, there is a risk that they will allow policy to foreclose the future tense, to exile those aspects of their work not premised on an economic imperative. Thinking may provide them with a basis to fight the advent of future worlds that devalue them and to engage more fiercely those actions that will assist in bringing about more desirable futures.

Acknowledgements:

This work was supported by a Further Education Trust for Leadership grant.

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Word count: 7670

Annexe 1: Individual and group interview questions.

1. Can you broadly position the college and your role for me; where do you see the sector – in terms of major challenges it faces; how well do you think the college is fairing within that context and how do you see your role?

2. Do you think it matters that government policy focusses so relentlessly on the economic benefits of education?

3. Does austerity lead to leaner and more efficient and more focussed institutions? 4.

How do the local community view the college? 5. What are your feelings about the future of further education (FE) – as an individual college and as a sector?

6. What in your view is the college's primary role in relation to a) government policy b) the local community?

7. To whom are you accountable – I mean here legal institutional accountability – but also other accountabilities – ethical accountability – democratic accountability?

8. What aspects of your role do you consider a. most important; least important; b. most time consuming; c. the greatest consumer but least beneficial use of time.

9. Do you take the job home with you?

10. What does it take to lead a successful college such as this? 11. One of the things that interests me is the extent to which / the ways in which personal and professional values are reflected in the role of the college principal. Do you feel there is consistency between your professional values and the values that shape the college?

12. It's easy to feel nostalgic about FE – but has there in your view been a substantial change in policy direction for FE?

13. Are there any issues (regarding policy) over which you would resign?