



The changing locus of workplace control in the English further education sector

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to discuss how the so-called “modernisation” agenda has triggered changes in the structure and management of the UK public sector. The concern of the paper is with how such changes have impacted on the labour process of lecturers in the English further education sector.

Design/methodology/approach – A Bravermanian approach is adopted to examine aspects of change in the FE lecturer labour process. Empirical evidence is derived from three FE colleges and draws on data from semi-structured interviews, a survey of lecturers and documentary evidence.

Findings – Power relations have been radically reinvented in these colleges, with senior managers now able to redefine the parameters of lecturers’ contractual obligations. These colleges were characterised by standardisation, routinisation and rules driven by senior managers who saw themselves as “change agents” and “modernisers”. Lecturers, on the other hand, felt that they had less power, job autonomy and task discretion. The labour process provides a valid explanatory framework for linking these observed changes in workplace relations to broader matters of political economy.

Research limitations/implications – The research provides detailed insights into changes in FE lecturers’ working experiences. However, the reliance on three colleges may place some limitations on the generalisability of these findings.

Practical implications – FE lecturers are central to delivering on ministerial priorities around skills for work. The paper reveals that lecturers feel under-valued, over-worked and over-managed. This raises questions as to the sustainability of current approaches to the management of FE lecturer labour.

Originality/value – The FE sector continues to be under-researched and the paper therefore provides a valuable contribution.

Keywords Further education, Organizational change, Work identity, Public sector organizations

Paper type Research paper



1. Introduction

There has been considerable change in the structure and management of public services since 1980. It has affected organisational boundaries, it has confronted the

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traditional “public sector ethos”, it has exposed the sector to the discipline of the market, and it has put in place performance and quality management surveillance regimes to increase accountability and control costs. The contention here is that these changes have had major implications for how work is managed and for employees as their labour process has been systematically redefined and degraded (Braverman, 1974) and as work has intensified. In particular, the role of the public service professional has been undermined as part of an enforced shift in the locus of decision-making power towards empowered senior managers in whose interests new models of public sector management have been constructed and reified.

We have argued elsewhere (Mather *et al.*, 2007) that the ideological underpinning to the ongoing programme of public sector reform can be explicitly linked to changes in the labour process of public service workers along the lines that Braverman suggested; our previous work sought to explain how politically inspired and ideologically charged structural and financial reforms applied to English further education (FE) had translated into intense managerial activity intent on securing more for less from lecturer labour. As a consequence, the focus of this previous work lay in reporting on lecturers’ work intensification at the chalk face and manifestations of their resistance to this process.

Our purpose here, again located primarily within the still under-researched FE sector, is to further explore how the labour process of lecturers has been transformed as new models of public sector management have been developed and imposed. While we seek to develop our earlier work around work intensification, our aim here is to widen the debate to encompass the changing power relationships between lecturers who self-identify as professionals and their managers who often regard themselves as “modernisers”. The analysis is empirically grounded in the lived experiences of lecturers and their managers in three colleges, augmented by reference to documentary sources from within each institution. The evidence illustrates that lecturers are working harder and to an increasingly managerially defined agenda around what gets taught by whom, when and how. This may suggest that the labour process of lecturers has been degraded as power has shifted within colleges away from lecturers as professionals to a growing tier of managers who use the language and logic of efficiency and managerialism to legitimise their actions. To use Mintzberg’s (1994) typology, such changes may reflect a process of transition from professional bureaucracy to machine organisation.

The paper comprises four main sections: first, the public sector context of the research and new public management (NPM) are discussed; second, the transformation of the FE sector is described; third, empirical evidence is presented to reveal how the labour process of FE lecturers has been degraded, how the locus of power and decision-making has changed, and how managers now have greater control over the pace, volume and content of professional work leading to both work intensification and extensification; and fourth, the implications of the research for understanding the process and impact of “modernising” the sector are drawn out.

2. The research context

2.1 *The growth of managerialism and trends in work intensification*

Since the election of a Conservative government in 1979, the public sector has been the focus of a barrage of legislation focused on privatisation and exposing the sector to

market competition through compulsory competitive tendering (CCT), best value, and “market testing”. Performance management systems have been put in place, resulting in the creation of league tables; regimes such as Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) have been developed to categorise local authorities; and managers have been appointed with what some have suggested is a covert agenda to “whip the professionals into shape” (Pollitt, 1993; Walsh, 1995). It is this “whipping into shape” that provides the focus of this research.

It has been argued that public sector organisations have been used as the “test-bed” for ministerial experimentation with free market principles” (Legge, 2005 p. 267) with public policy founded on the application of neo-liberal ideals about how best to deliver public services. Accordingly, the development of NPM (Hood, 1995; Ferlie *et al.*, 1996; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004) includes a drive to transform public sector organisations that were professional bureaucracies with dominant codes of professional ethics and standards into machine organisations (Mintzberg, 1994) where power has been assumed by incentivised managers determined to run these organisations on sound business principles (Martin, 2002). While this does not necessarily denote a unidirectional shift from one organisational archetype to another (Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd, 2003), there has nevertheless been the emergence of a public sector that operates increasingly “within the overarching logics of managerialism” (Clarke and Newman, 1997 p. 56): even the language of the private sector has pervaded the sector (Clarke *et al.*, 2000).

The dominant logic has become the search for greater efficiency in the use of resources to reduce costs and keep public sector spending within limits (Worrall and Cooper, 2007). Such logic poses significant implications for labour management, as managers are “inclined to monitor labour utilization closely” to ensure compliance with “stipulated performance criteria and to minimize short-run costs” (Colling, 2003, p. 77). This is exemplified in local government, where Best value principles under the mantra of “modernisation” promised both cost savings and service quality improvements that have resulted in reduced staffing, work intensification (Geddes, 2001; Richardson *et al.*, 2005) and much closer attention being paid to performance monitoring, surveillance and control (Bach, 2002; Seifert and Sibley, 2005).

In their pursuit of cost reduction, managers use a battery of instruments such as downsizing, delaying, redundancy and outsourcing in order to respond to constraints in public spending. They have adopted the techniques used to effect change in the private sector, particularly outsourcing, often disguised as strategic partnerships and the increased use of contracting out, facilitated by virtue of the so-called “purchaser-provider split” and other forms of “marketisation”. Rainbird *et al.* (2004 p. 94), for example, noted that “where contracts have been retained in-house, public sector managers have been required to control expenditure, monitor performance and introduce private sector management techniques”.

Managers have sought to “make their assets sweat” by using them more intensively (Burchell *et al.*, 2002). In the case of workers in the labour-intensive public services, this has meant reorganising and deskilling work and replacing workers on full-time contracts with out-workers, overseas workers, or contingent workers. This explains reports of the “unambiguous casualisation” of parts of the public sector workforce (Morgan *et al.*, 2000, p. 91). Efficiency savings in the NHS have translated into labour cost reductions achieved either by lowering the overall pay bill through initiatives such

as casualisation and deskilling or by intensifying the work effort of employees (Bolton, 2004; Hewison, 1999). Similar developments are evident in the education sector (Barry *et al.*, 2001; Bryson, 2004; Reid, 2003).

The application of managerial performance controls such as benchmarking, target setting and audit is now pervasive to NPM and is made explicit in every aspect of internal and external evaluation and compliance with standardised measures for each service. This extends to labour performance indicators which, it has been argued, contrast sharply with “ideals of professionalism” (Givan, 2005, p. 634). Consequently, there are reports of shifts in the locus of control away from service professionals into managerial hands (Gill *et al.*, 2003). These developments are buttressed by reports of how NPM has led to increased standardisation, more narrowly defined training and reduced “worker discretion” (Grugulis *et al.*, 2003). Felstead *et al.* (2004), drawing on both the private and public sectors, also identified “a marked decline in task discretion” (p. 166), as a declining proportion of workers reported having choice over the way that they do their job, influence over how hard they work and what tasks they do.

While there is variability in the depth and pace of these developments (Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd, 2003), these studies reveal a pattern of management behaviour and organisational change in the public sector that is consistent with that posited by Braverman: the degradation of labour through work intensification and shifts in the locus of control away from public sector professionals to empowered public service managers. Braverman’s analysis was premised on the appeal of scientific management principles (Taylor, 1911) to managers as these were central to the explicit search for increased managerial control over the pace, volume and content of work. This brought about a separation of the conception of and the execution of tasks as the planning and problem solving aspects of the job traditionally embedded with the worker were relocated into managerial hands. Managers assumed increased control over the systematic planning of each step of the labour process, its mode of execution and the development of performance measures that they then enforced.

The overarching logic of labour process theory tells us that the effect and the intention of this approach is to deskill labour – to develop a division of labour and task fragmentation that reduces managerial dependence on skilled workers, thereby rendering them cheaper and easier to replace. Arguably, as workers are spared from time-consuming planning functions, their productivity increases. Work intensification may therefore be evidence of the deskilling of an occupation. Deskilling is also evident in the erosion of workers’ job autonomy and task discretion.

It is acknowledged that Braverman may have afforded Taylorism too much prominence (Stark, 1980) and refinements to labour process theory have discussed alternative typologies of managerial control strategies (Friedman, 1977; Jaros, 2005). Additionally, there are critiques of Braverman that centre on the limits to deskilling (Wood, 1982; Knights and Wilmott, 1990), with recent accounts seeking to establish that skill (and therefore deskilling) is the outcome of personal constructs embracing both objective and subjective elements (O’Doherty and Wilmott, 2000/2001). Such individualised accounts of skill, while undeniably helpful in illuminating the subjective experiences of work, may ignore connections between what happens in the workplace and broader trends arising from shifts in capitalist political economy (Edwards, 2005).

Furthermore, the tacit skill or “job know how” embedded within such subjective accounts is precisely that which cannot be controlled by managers and is that which

has been increasingly challenged within the NPM regime. This in turn implies that skill is inextricably bound up with the degree of discretion and autonomy exercised by a worker at the point of production or delivery and in the degree of control over the conception and execution of the task. Logically then, attempts to deskill workers are directly related to shifting the balance of power in favour of managers, offering them the means to secure more control over the pace, quantity and price of work. These issues, we feel, are particularly salient in our study of FE college lecturers.

Although Braverman's definition of skill is accused of being romanticised (Littler, 1982), it is a useful construct in the conceptualisation of "skill" as applied to public sector professionals. Public service provision has traditionally accorded professionals (often imbued with certificated knowledge and skill) a central role in the delivery of services and this has historically afforded them relative control over their own labour process. This "professional knowledge" moved beyond the administrative capability of public officials, placing reliance on the expertise of public sector professionals working to their own (rather than managerially determined) standards of "good" service (Ackroyd *et al.*, 1989). This denotes a "craft" mastery that is not dissimilar to Braverman's view on skill, implying as it does some notion of autonomy around the task, its performance and the pace and content of work.

Notwithstanding the richness of the post-Braverman labour process debate, we argue that the analytical strength of labour process theory lies in its potential for linking workplace relations to the political economy of the public sector. Conceptualised along these lines, it is possible to link downward pressure on costs to labour management strategies designed to lower unit labour costs and shift the control of task performance into managerial hands, often using initiatives such as "quality management" as a legitimating technology. This is not to say that such initiatives go unchallenged by workers and public sector workers in particular have resisted individually, collectively and professionally (Mather *et al.*, 2007). However, following Braverman's logic, resistance does not create a cessation of management controls, on the contrary, we argue that resistance triggers the intensification of management effort and the reification of control.

We suggest then that a Bravermanian approach offers a useful framework with which to examine how transitions in the organisation and delivery of the FE service have redefined the labour process of college lecturers. Logically, the introduction of a competitive, FE marketplace should encourage managerial efforts to increase the rate at which absolute and relative "surplus value" from lecturers' labour power is realised. The argument is that reforming the FE sector has led to downward pressure on unit labour costs, leading inevitably to practices that secure "more for less" from college workers by increasing the rate of their exploitation. The expectation is that power relations within FE colleges have been redefined so that college managers have come to control the core components of the lecturers' labour process (Randle and Brady, 1997a, b). These changes encapsulate the shifting locus of control around the lecturer's task, how that task is performed and the circumstances under which it is performed. The contention here is that the maximisation of labour utilisation is the central managerial concern in the sector.

The remainder of the paper uses the changing context of FE colleges and their management to explore the tensions that have surfaced between public sector managers (who often see themselves as modernisers and change agents) and those who

self-identify as professionals (who are often driven by a non-managerial value system). It is necessary at this point to distinguish between “managers in organisations” who exist to set and monitor objectives and allocate resources geared to achieving organisational goals, and “professionals in organisations”, whose actions are governed more by extra-organisational value systems such as professional norms and codes of professional ethics and behaviour. The interest of this research lies in the self-ascribed professional nature of lecturing and with declining discretion around the job itself (Avis, 2005; Robson, 1998), the changing power relationships between professionals and their managers, and the intensification of work.

3. The transformation of the FE sector

The FE sector has been subject to major change since the Further and Higher Education Act in 1992 (Beale, 2004; Smithers and Robinson, 2000). The process of college “incorporation” triggered by the Act immediately reconstituted college governing bodies to reflect a more “business-like” approach (Pratt, 2000). The pace of change was notable as reform was applied more rapidly than elsewhere in the public sector (Burchill, 2001). Central to this process was a funding mechanism designed to stimulate competitive pressure and make the sector more market-orientated, underpinned by overall funding cuts and more targeted funding (Simkins, 2000) dependent on objectives being met.

Despite additional sector funding in 2001, investment was firmly linked to further “modernisation” of service provision, and receipt was dependent on institutions delivering quality, efficiency and value for money objectives (Department for Education and Employment, 2001; Gibson, 2001) suggesting that the post-1997 political agenda has been concerned with further embedding the new marketised FE order. The recent ministerial response to the 2005 Foster Report offers more of the same: namely, a concern with “increasing productivity in the workplace” (Department for Education and Skills, 2006, p. 40) and “how economically, efficiently and effectively resources have been used” (p. 59). At college level this has been translated into a systematic attempt to de-skill the lecturer labour process by the use of management practices designed to secure more for less (work intensification) via greater managerial control and task prescription and cost reduction. Some authors have pointed to a softening in the extent and virulence of managerialism in the sector (Gleeson, 2001; Simkins and Lumby, 2002); however, as we will explore later, this softening is not borne out by the empirical analysis that follows.

Lecturers have not passively accepted change and the sector has experienced significant collective resistance and industrial relations turmoil (Williams, 2003). Against this backdrop, Robson (1998) has argued that the professional basis of lecturers has proved vulnerable to the reform process as a consequence of weak occupational boundaries derived from the heterogeneity of prior professional experience of FE lecturers which, in turn, reflects the diversity of the curriculum, levels and modes of study and, significantly, the historical lack of professional recognition. Additionally, there have been debates about the nature of professionalism among FE lecturers, and particularly those who self-identify as vocational teachers (Robson *et al.*, 2004). These debates illuminate the contested nature of professionalism in the sector and, importantly, they expose the ways in which lecturers seek to understand their own labour process. The aim in this paper is to contribute to this

debate, by examining developments in three FE colleges in the context of broader shifts in the political economy of the FE sector, thus exploiting labour process theory as a bridging device that allows us to link changes at the macro-level to their micro-consequences for FE lecturers.

4. The FE labour process: where managers confront professionals

4.1 *The study*

Evidence was derived from three colleges (A, B and C) in the West Midlands in 2002/2003. The institutions were similar in size and were operating within similar local economic and demographic contexts. Although the case study method gave detailed insights into lecturers' experiences, we accept that relying on three colleges in one region may place some limitations on the generalisability of these findings. The first phase of the research involved 32 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with managers, trade union representatives and lecturers[1]. Senior college managers, in each case, wished to retain control over who was interviewed. Although this opened up potential for selector bias, all interviewees were extremely forthcoming with their responses. Data derived from these interviews informed the design of the questionnaire used in a survey of all lecturing staff employed in the colleges. In total, 473 responses were achieved. Responses rates varied across institutions (33 per cent in College A, 46 per cent in College B, and 27 per cent in College C).

The rationale underpinning the survey rested on generating a more complete picture of lecturers' experiences across a range of issues. It is acknowledged that measuring concepts such as work intensification objectively is difficult; as Burchell *et al.* (2002) noted, while self-reporting provides useful insights into work intensification as perceived by workers, the approach can yield highly subjective responses. For this reason, survey responses have not solely been relied on here as a source of evidence: an open-ended question at the end of the survey[2] generated a wealth of qualitative data on lecturers' perceptions of core labour process issues and these have provided the base of evidence for this paper thus complementing an earlier publication (Mather *et al.*, 2007). Considerable use was also made of college reports and other documentary evidence.

4.2 *Changes in the contractual basis of work*

Whitley-style collective agreements in the FE sector were codified within the "Silver Book" defining lecturers' terms and conditions of employment prior to incorporation. The "Silver Book Dispute" (Labour Research Department, 1998) encapsulates many of the contested aspects of the degradation of the labour process with which this paper is concerned. The contract contained within the Silver Book defined maximum weekly and annual teaching hours: lecturers would not ordinarily be required to teach in excess of 21 hours per week. There was an expectation that lecturers would be in college (i.e. "available") for an additional nine hours: hence, they could be on site for up to 30 hours per week. This was loosely managed in each of the colleges with lecturers reporting that as long as you were "in the right place at the right time for your lessons, no-one bothered you – it wasn't too bad, you know, you just got on with lesson preparation or seeing to the students" (Lecturer, College C).

Inferred within these arrangements was a degree of professional autonomy as lecturers were largely left alone to get on with the job. The Silver Book defined the

boundaries of the wage-effort bargain, although lecturers traditionally worked beyond contractual hours to complete tasks such as lesson preparation and subject development (Hall, 1994). This suggests a tradition of professionalism that broadly fits with notions of individual responsibility, autonomy and doing whatever is required to do the job “well” (Hoyle, 2001). However, a college principal’s comments demonstrate that this degree of job autonomy was problematic for managers:

Taken as a whole, they (the Silver Book arrangements) are a complex network of rules and practices which, when followed closely, create significant barriers to the effective operation of the college. They are considered by this corporation to be inappropriate to the work of a modern-day professional educator (memo from Principal, College A, April 1994).

The introduction of a “professional contract” to replace the perceived rigidities of the Silver Book created industrial conflict and the resultant dispute underscored the contested terrain around the lecturers’ wage-effort bargain with developments in the colleges illustrating a shift in the balance of power in favour of college management. While attempts were made to impose the new “professional contract” across all colleges in the UK, outcomes in each institution varied reflecting the tenacity of local college managers and the ability of NATFHE branch activists to mobilise lecturers’ resistance (Williams, 2003). However, as Table I reveals, the replacement of the Silver Book did redefine the wage-effort bargain in the favour of management. The extent of intensification can be assessed by comparing the contractual teaching hours contained in the new professional contracts alongside the previous Silver Book arrangements.

These new contractual arrangements were not simply a product of unilateral management decision-making but rather the outcome of “negotiated” deals within institutions that supposedly reflected the relative power balance of managers and lecturers’ collective mobilisation in each college. However, there was little variability between the three colleges around contractual terms despite the apparently fierce union resistance in Colleges A and B during the Silver Book Dispute. This indicates the degree of external pressure, ostensibly from the Further Education Funding Council (now the Learning and Skills Council), that was applied to senior managers to impose contractual changes.

In College A, where there was a tradition of strong NATFHE activity, a negotiated contract was agreed after protracted discussions and a series of strikes. All lecturers signed the new contract and were given a £750 one-off payment as inducement. The view of NATFHE activists at College A was that all would sign or no one would sign, thereby avoiding fragmented contractual arrangements. NATFHE activists at Colleges B and C initially refused to negotiate but once a local agreement had been reached in College A they were forced to shift their position as their own college management teams, buttressed by the agreement in College A plus support from the then influential College Employers’ Forum, forced through the changes. As the branch secretary from College B pointed out, “the whole thing fell apart like a pack of cards”. The management teams of Colleges B and C decided to negotiate with NATFHE rather than impose the model contract, indicating a desire to avoid protracted industrial action. At this point NATFHE activists considered that a new contract was inevitable, so it was “just a question of getting a decent deal” (NATFHE Branch Secretary, College B).

Unlike College A, not all lecturers in Colleges B and C agreed to contractual changes, with some lecturers in both institutions still covered by Silver Book arrangements. As a result they had received no cost-of-living pay rise since 1993. One lecturer who had

Contract	College A	College B	College C	Silver Book
Annual teaching commitment (maximum)	800 hours	850 hours (50 allocated for advice and guidance)	850 hours	756 hours
Weekly teaching hours (maximum)	23 hours (24 for a maximum of 14 weeks)	23 hours (but may be exceeded for up to 14 weeks)	23 hours (but may be exceeded for up to 14 weeks)	21 hours ^a
In-attendance requirement (in addition to teaching hours)	12 hours	14.5 hours	14.5 hours	9 hours
Holidays	35 days	35 days	35 days	60 days
Self-directed study days	15	-	-	-
Directed study days	3	15	8	-
Notice periods	Statutory	Statutory	Statutory	Six months

Notes: These contractual arrangements were revised again shortly after completion of the research to incorporate additional lecturing duties in each college through a system of "averaging up" hours, a reduction in the scope of self-directed activity and additional "in-attendance" requirements for recruitment and revision activities.^a Although 21 hours was the maximum weekly teaching commitment, this was usually discounted for various duties so lecturers were seldom required in class for the full 21 hours

Table I.
The "New Professional Contract" and the Silver Book

been teaching full-time for 26 years at College C and was earning £20,538 per year indicated that he had not received a cost-of-living pay rise for the last nine years. This state of affairs was condemned by other lecturers who commented that “the college has a shabby attitude towards people on old Silver Book contracts. I think they’re morally reprehensible” (Lecturer, College C). This situation, coupled with the Silver Book dispute, provided the basis for more general criticisms levelled at managers, so “on the issue of Silver Book, what a terrible way to treat staff who’ve worked long and hard. No wonder long serving members of staff are leaving” (Lecturer, College C).

4.3 *Work intensification*

The introduction of new contracts is important for two reasons; first, the ability of managers to redefine the professional parameters of lecturers’ contractual obligations underwrites the shift in power alluded to above, circumventing what Millerson (1964) referred to as the ability of professional workers to exert control over their own contractual and labour process arrangements. Second, the new contract increased the amount of time that a lecturer spent in the classroom. Burchell *et al.* (2002, pp. 71-2) caution that “while the spread of the ‘long hours’ culture is an important phenomenon in its own right, work *intensification* i.e. the effort that employees put into their job during the time that they are working, has received less attention”. This “effort” was clearly of concern to senior managers when interviewed, mirroring clearly articulated objectives on improving labour utilisation that featured in college planning documents.

This preoccupation with lecturers’ productivity permeated much of the college planning documentation so, for example, target increases in student numbers were stated to be “achievable through productivity gains made available from more flexible use of lecturers’ timetables” (Board of Governors Meeting, College A). As noted later, the lecturers in this study construed flexibility rather differently. Lecturers’ responses during interview revealed an overwhelming view that they often felt “too tired to teach”, found the job increasingly stressful and generally worked over their contract hours. Lecturers were concerned about how staff shortages further pressurised their working day. This placed lecturers under pressure to go to work even when they were unwell and burdened them with additional work when lecturers were not replaced or were absent. Managers revealed that they saw lecturers’ reluctance to cover for absent staff as evidence of both contractual and attitudinal “inflexibility” while lecturers viewed staff shortages as a direct outcome of managers’ aims to reduce overall labour costs. They also felt the high and growing volume of absence was an outcome of the intensification process. For example, lecturers commented:

I’m working about 200 hours over (contract hours) this year as I need the money. I have had to put in three self-cert forms with stress this year (Lecturer, College C).

We have lost three staff, two through stress-related illness, in the last twelve months and they are not being replaced. We’ve been given extra responsibility for an IT suite containing 70 PCs – with no technicians – says it all really (Lecturer, College A).

4.4 *Contested control*

Discussions with lecturers revealed the increased use of business metaphors and terminology to describe the so-called “modern” FE environment. This development sought to legitimise intensification by conflating it with efficiency. The language that

managers and lecturers used to describe the same things was therefore often radically different. Managers emphasised the new “business of FE”, so “consumer demand is more significant now and we need to work to ensure that lecturers understand this” (Vice Principal, College A). Lecturers’ understanding was reflected in their argument that the “FE product” was now expressed in monetary terms following a reduction in unit funding. Staff felt they had to do both “more for less” and “more with less”. As one noted, “we have done so much, for so long, with so little, that we are now capable of doing something with nothing” (Lecturer, College B). Another commented that “there’s more pressure put upon us to have ‘bums on seats’” (Lecturer, College C) with another lecturer adding that “basically it’s bums on seats, keeping them on seats and making sure they pass, with minimal resources” (Lecturer, College C). Some lecturers drew on “factory production” and “McDonalds” as metaphors to explain how they felt about their work as they were expected to “churn out” a standard product under highly regulated and controlled conditions – a view also reported in UK higher education (Parker and Jary, 1995; Wilson, 1991). One lecturer argued “FE management is not about helping students learn – it is about obeying the threats of a series of governments which have neither understood, nor loved FE” (Lecturer, College A).

Other contested actions had focused on de-skilling through the reduction of both role and professional autonomy in terms of what was taught, how it was taught, and increased task standardisation, all of which had been driven forward in the name of “efficiency” and “quality” (Longhurst, 1996). The study also revealed contrasting professional concerns about student needs and resource considerations driven by funding formulae. Comments suggested that lecturers were aware of overriding financial pressures facing college managers and the impact on managerial decision-making in curriculum design, recruitment targets and cost-cutting measures – the issue here being that decisions about who teaches what and for how long directly impact upon the content and intensity of the lecturer’s job.

Increasingly, lecturers were required to teach outside their subject specialism simply to achieve “full timetables”, with an unwillingness to do so being categorised as “inflexibility”. This presents several problems: first, lecturers complained that teaching something new was problematic when there was no time to prepare; second, they construed their redeployment from one subject to another as detrimental to their professional knowledge by effectively equating one subject specialism with another; and third, they noted how they often had to teach from “instructor packs” in workshops to get “up to hours”, having made no input into the content of the materials being used. An example was a philosophy lecturer who had been timetabled to teach basic skills to trainee hairdressers as part of his weekly teaching load. This suggests that lecturers had been marginalised from decision-making as managers had increasingly taken control of core work-planning matters, legitimised within the language of flexibility.

Lecturers and managers expressed very different interpretations of the concept of flexibility, as was encapsulated by a lecturer from College A:

On the question of flexibility, from a college manager’s point of view it’s about having an “anytime, anyplace, anywhere” contract – known as the Martini worker. From my point of view, flexibility is about being able to conduct my classes as I see fit.

This quotation juxtaposes a managerial view of flexibility to achieve efficiency and a professional view of flexibility that focuses on role autonomy and the exercise of

professional discretion. While managers sought to achieve “flexibility”, their actions had created a low trust environment where voluntary flexibility based on goodwill could not be achieved. As a lecturer from College B commented, “I agree that flexibility of contract would be good but feel that management would use it to force ever increasing demands on lecturers”. Interviews with senior managers and analysis of college documents (the Strategic Plan for College A) revealed an overriding preoccupation with securing more labour flexibility across the three colleges, with priority being attached to “careful” labour management, improved staff utilisation and achieving lower staff costs. Several lecturers expressed concerns about the tendency for managers to appoint new lecturers that were inexperienced and cheaper or to offer only temporary or fixed-term contracts. A lecturer in College C pointed out “I’m ashamed to say but the last four recruits in our college are really poor quality but they are less costly to employ than someone who has loads of experience”. This move towards employing cheaper staff parallels developments in schools (Sinclair *et al.*, 1996) and higher education (Bryson, 2004).

Lecturers expressed the opinion that “management” had sought systematically to redefine the skill component of the lecturing job by means of imposing standardised measures of professional competence that challenged the unique heterogeneity of prior occupational and subject expertise traditionally found within the sector (Hall, 1994). Such measures were enforced by means of rigorous lesson observations, lesson planning documentation (and regular checks on these) and more recently, a willingness to link “poor performance” in the classroom to competence procedures. Lesson planning documentation, framed by external inspection requirements, had emanated from management groups and had had little input from lecturers in the colleges. Unsurprisingly, they viewed such approaches with distrust and, at times, fear. Underlying this was a lecturer perception that such approaches were indicative of the emergence of blame and bullying culture. One senior manager’s comments reinforced this view: “we all know that incompetence wasn’t tackled in the cosy old days, but you can’t get away with this now” (Vice Principal, College A). The implicit assumption was that lecturers were under-performing according to managerially defined criteria. Lecturers had noticed changes in managerial behaviour as managers countered what they perceived to be worker resistance by using what workers thought were bullying tactics: one lecturer (College C) commented, “bullying from line managers is becoming more and more of a problem here” while another (College A) noted that “the school leader states what she wants without discussion. I just avoid her at all costs”.

The intensification of work and work pressure reported here is a direct consequence of a reform process that has yielded considerable productivity gains by having fewer lecturers working longer hours in the classroom. The sustained attack on lecturers labelled as “inflexible” and offering an inflexible curriculum is construed here to be part of the legitimising process for managerially driven changes to intensify lecturers’ work. If this can be rationalised and legitimised in the name of the “customer” or “modernisation” or “progress” or “quality improvement”, then resistance to such changes is portrayed as being self-serving and usually labelled as “unprofessional”.

4.5 Changing career pathways

When interviewed, senior managers acknowledged that their primary objective was improving efficiency, so that controlling total labour costs was a central element in

their labour management strategies. Particular importance was attached to the need to match lecturers to students cost-effectively:

We believe there is now a formula which says if you've got so many students that generate so many tariff units, you should have so many staff in classrooms. There's a best practice guide and we're very keen to look further into this (Director of Staff Services, College A).

It's about using the contract and trying to get the best out of staff on that contract, without breaching the contract . . . what I think we've got to do is move forward and get the ability to let resources follow demand (Director of Resources, College B).

An examination of planning documents further emphasised a clear attempt in each college to adopt standardised measures of efficient labour utilisation expressed as "ideal staff cost ratios against national benchmark figures". Job losses or restructuring were achieved through voluntary redundancies and early retirement. While there had been no compulsory redundancies at the time of the study, this had been threatened. Action had been taken to redefine lecturers' career pathways and structures; job titles and lecturers' roles had been reconfigured to inhibit progression through the academic job hierarchy. One lecturer commented:

We used to have progression based upon the type of work you did. I mean I've done a lot of HNC work over the years. You would have progressed if your teaching load was half the higher level – you would have progressed up to senior lecturer role. Now that's stopped – the progression has ceased. The only way you can get a senior lecturer is by promotion – you know applying for a job which is a management role, like section leaders' (Senior lecturer, College B).

The effect had been to reduce overall salary costs, thus cheapening labour and undervaluing the work undertaken. This was accentuated by pay banding that had restricted movement through the lecturer pay scale. One lecturer explained that "you have to do more to move up the scale, you know, take on extra responsibility and all that. Just teaching isn't enough" (Lecturer, College A). The increase in teaching hours delivered by the new contracts also needs to be seen in the context of job losses. Each of the colleges employed over 600 staff at the time of incorporation but each had significantly reduced headcounts at the time of this study: full-time equivalent (FTE) staff numbers stood at 280, 290 and 259 in Colleges A, B and C, respectively. Strategic and annual operating plans in the colleges revealed year-on-year growth in student numbers in all three colleges and, consequently, this had resulted in fewer lecturers working longer hours and teaching more students at much higher student/staff ratios.

4.6 Professionalism or 'just a job'?

Consistent with findings from elsewhere (Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997), the impact of these events and changed managerial behaviours has been to increase mistrust and job insecurity. The number of staff showing distinct signs of alienation was consistent with Braverman's analysis, with lecturers overwhelmingly indicating that they felt "worn down", depressed and demoralised. They commented "I don't feel part of anything" (Lecturer, College A) and "I hate the person I have become" (Lecturer, College C). Several expressed a desire to quit their jobs and they all complained about the increasingly onerous reporting requirements emanating from the various college management functions, particularly quality management and inspection regimes.

The research revealed an underlying notion of professional values associated with wanting to do one's best for one's students and this was seen as the prime source of job satisfaction and motivation by several lecturers: "the students are a delight, whatever their ability. That's why I came into the job" (Lecturer, College A) and "contact with students makes it possible to survive" (Lecturer, College B). Their claims to act in defence of the well-being of their students imply that these lecturers self-identified as professionals who were the best arbiters of student needs. This moral rectitude prepared the ground for conflating the protection of the lecturer labour process and the quality of service given to students. In so doing, lecturers were able to claim that the reforms had disadvantaged both students and lecturers alike. For example, a lecturer in College A felt that "students' learning and well-being come a very poor second to the running of a business"; another lecturer in the same college saw both lecturers and students as "co-victims of the corporate approach" while another spoke of the "triumph of style over content and the demise of autonomy for lecturing staff" (Lecturer, College A). Many lecturers felt that the managerialisation of FE and the commodification of education had changed their relationship with their students who were now identified as "customers" in college literature. The changes had caused many to rethink their own view of themselves with several lecturers referring to lecturing in FE as being a job (rather than a profession) that they wished they could quit ("Every time there's a (redundancy) package to leave, there's a rush for the door", Lecturer, College B). Although managerialist literature rhetorically espoused the benefits of concepts such as inspirational leadership and empowerment, the reality for lecturers appeared to be increased centralised control, reduced autonomy, job degradation, cost reduction and strategies to improve productivity by intensifying the utilisation of labour.

5. Conclusions

The process by which the new contract was introduced and the events that had unfolded since its introduction suggest that the balance of power had shifted in favour of college managers. Allied to this, the shift from national to single-employer bargaining undermined NATFHE's ability to defend the national agreement. External pressures placed upon college managers, specifically the funding threat, severely curtailed local managerial opposition to the changes and managers assumed greater freedom to manage labour costs and performance as the new contract allowed managers to intensify lecturers' work. Senior managers now had the ability to redefine the professional parameters of lecturers' contractual obligations and this demonstrated a clear power shift that circumvented the ability of lecturers to exert controls over their own contractual arrangements and labour processes. The new contract increased the amount of time that a lecturer spent teaching in the classroom and, more insidiously, incorporated an increasingly onerous definition of what constituted teaching and non-teaching activity. This redefinition had the effect of further intensifying the work undertaken by lecturers, echoing the findings of Randle and Brady (1997a, b) elsewhere in the sector.

The research was conducted in an era when FE colleges were, to use Mintzberg's typology, going through a process of transformation from professional bureaucracies to machine organisations, involving a clear move from a craft mode of production where skill is embedded within the worker rather than in the process of production and where the pace and configuration of work was controlled by the people who actually do

it. This mode required them to work with a degree of independence from their colleagues but closely with their clients in an environment where the quality of the client-worker relationship was a critical determinant of effectiveness. In this environment professional standards are generated within the profession and policed by the profession rather than externally imposed and monitored by managers divorced from the actual process of delivery. A machine organisation, on the other hand, is characterised by standardisation and by the routinisation of procedures, rules and regulations. Communication is formalised and power centralised with an emphasis on the sharp distinction between managers and workers. Planning is divorced from the process of delivery and organisational goals are geared to efficiency and cost minimisation. From a position where management was embedded within delivery, there has been a move to a position where management is divorced from delivery and where some might argue does not understand delivery nor is able to learn from delivery. Increasingly a managerial language of standardisation, effectiveness, efficiency, customers and labour utilisation had been adopted. Lecturers now felt that they had less control, power and autonomy; that their terms and conditions and working practices had been radically and unilaterally reinvented, and that their volume and pattern of work had been massively intensified.

There is an inherent paradox in the way that managers conceptualised their actions. While many of them saw themselves as modernisers or change agents, their neo-managerialist approach could be seen as a reversion to a largely discredited view of management developed by Taylor: it certainly runs counter to the rhetoric of management that emphasises inspiration, leadership and empowerment and the notion of high performance work organisations (Department of Trade and Industry, 2002). In this sense, labour process theory offers a valid explanatory framework for the changes observed in this research. As one lecturer commented:

[I]t's all money driven now. I mean it's not really for the community or the students is it? It's money driven. Everything has to make a profit, you know, student in-student out and that's not education really, is it? (Lecturer, College B).

The concepts, techniques, language and processes of factory production seemed to be being deployed to deliver the FE "product". This research, in parallel with other studies in the sector, suggests that FE has become populated by an increasingly alienated and stressed labour force more inclined to see their work as a production job and not as a profession or a vocation. The study has provided evidence of a shift in the locus of power away from professionals to managers, has revealed that work has intensified, has identified increased alienation, and has illustrated the degradation and de-skilling of lecturing work. Structural and financial changes wrought on this sector have radically redefined the daily working experiences of lecturers. Notwithstanding the debates about whether FE lecturers do or do not enjoy professional occupational status, they appear to self-identify as professionals and this study suggests that lecturers' identity has been eroded through measures to cheapen the lecturer labour force, rendering it more easily replaceable, manageable, compliant and flexible.

This research contributes to a growing body of literature on the impact of neo-liberal reforms on other public service professionals. An important part of this debate is the variable pace and degree of change between and within different parts of the public sector. The findings presented here suggest that lecturers' professional job

controls have proved fragile in the face of ministerially driven reform and subsequent management belligerence. This fragility can partially be explained by the structural and financial changes triggered by the FHE Act of 1992. FE's relative (and long-standing) invisibility has meant that its radical and unilateral reform met with little public or media opposition. Likewise, the historical vulnerability of FE lecturers due to the thin, highly diffuse and heterogeneous professional backgrounds of FE lecturers, has perhaps contributed to the speed of transformation in the FE sector. The passage of the act swiftly dismantled the national FE sector with each college reconstituted as a separate, corporate body and immediately shifted the locus of job regulation from the national to the workplace level. The sector had never been generously funded, so each college was already cash-strapped at the time of incorporation. State-led funding cuts combined with the punitive measures of the new funding methodology and challenging sector growth targets to trigger immediate financial pressures. Struggling to balance the books, managers were invariably led down the route of securing more for less and more with less from lecturers. State policy, articulated through the reform process, combined with difficult financial pressures immediately after incorporation, caused college managers to take an aggressive approach to the management of lecturer labour. The outcomes were the more intense use of lecturer labour and the deskilling of work through the centralisation of control, both of which are consistent with a Bravermanian labour process perspective.

Notes

1. Included a stratified sample of managers operating at all levels (ten in total), two workplace trade union (NATFHE) representatives and 20 lecturers (including three senior lecturers).
2. "Could you provide any additional comments relating to your views on any of the issues raised in the questionnaire or on any related job issues of importance to you?"

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Further reading

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