NPM in an Age of Austerity: Knowledge and Experience in Further Education

This article originates in a piece of educational research into the experiences of Further Education (FE) student teachers in the West Midlands region of England. This cohort of students experienced significant upheaval in their college workplaces and placements during the 2010/11 academic year. Pressures on FE funding were exacerbated by a Comprehensive Spending Review by the coalition government in late 2010 - prompted by the on-going global economic crisis. Some of the repercussions of these funding cuts for staff and students in the sector are discussed in this paper, as perceived by this cohort of student teachers working in a range of FE providers across the West Midlands. Many of these repercussions can broadly be seen as an extension of existing managerialist practices, as the justification for an increasing squeeze on local resource allocation continues to be a wider appeal to global market 'realities'. But we theorise that NPM plays an important role in a reductive kind of knowledge production for policy makers which fuels and legitimises on-going policy intervention and see this as an important shaping force in the emerging professional identity of these new teachers.

Rob Smith & Matt O'Leary, Centre for Research and Development in Lifelong Education, University of Wolverhampton, June 2013

Introduction and Context

The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) ushered in the marketisation of the Further Education (FE) sector in England and in so doing laid the foundations for the introduction of the cultures and practices of NPM. The Act made colleges budget holders, producers of 'market information' and accountable to students and funding bodies - thus mirroring new regimes of financing and management in other parts of the public sector (Clarke *et al* 1994, Clarke and Newman 1997, Considine and Painter 1997). Over the twenty years since, annual 'regulation' of the FE market, through funding incentives along with a series of political interventions in education and skills policy has established an FE sector inured to an unstable curriculum and consequently the necessity of recurrent 'restructuring' events (e.g. DfEE, 1999, FENTO, 1999; 2001; DfES, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006; LLUK, 2006).

Crucial in the re-organisation of FE is the issue of governance. Under the Act, the democratically accountable mechanisms of local education authorities (LEAs) were effectively removed and the interests of local employers became an architectural feature of governance: corporations were to have a two thirds membership of local employers (HMSO 1992). This innovation of governance is an aspect of what Ranson describes as the demolition of "an education system which expressed the purposes of the post-war social democratic polity" (Ranson 2012, p2). The positioning in decision-making processes of business and employers' interests is a key aspect of NPM as it relates to FE. With its heritage of 'technical' and vocational education, FE is perceived as serving a strongly instrumentalist function (see, for example Ainley and Bailey 1997, Smith 2007a). This

means that while there has been considerable investment in FE – of particular relevance to this study, in the area of Skills for Life (Moser 1999) – the investment has come with strings attached. Since its inception in 2000, the Skills for Life strategy has been subject to a policed set of targets, a rigid prescription of centralised assessment but, most significantly, it has been delivered within the existing marketised structure.

The impact of marketisation on education has been commented on in detail in the literature (e.g, Reay, David and Ball (2005), Whitty (2000)). FE in England can be regarded as the crucible in which an emerging model of marketisation in education has been tested out and that now, through academies and free schools, is to be expanded to include compulsory education. This is a model that has evolved within an environment in which education and skills have been presented as fundamental aspects of government policy activity – a policy continuum evident from Callaghan's Great Debate speech in 1976 to Blair's election rallying cry of 'Education, Education, Education' in 1997 and beyond. At the heart of this FE model lies a funding methodology that not only makes institutions accountable in terms of performance but is also amenable to centralised intervention from a palette of educational policy. The policy palette provides a range of possible themes that policy makers may seek to highlight, layer, blend or paint over. The metaphor is useful to articulate a sense of policy makers maintaining control over the canvas of the FE sector. The policy palette enables different policy effects to be achieved through the use of funding incentives and disincentives. In this way, new qualifications and initiatives are superimposed (e.g. the current "massive drive on apprenticeships" trumpeted by Prime Minister David Cameron in his moral capitalism speech (Cameron 2012) – over a pre-existing patina of half-forgotten, defunct and no-longer-new policies and practices.

It is important to note that the underlying purpose of marketisation is to 'drive up standards' in the sector. This fundamentalist belief is still evident in policy documents almost twenty years after incorporation (e.g. BIS 2010b, p.7). Despite claims of devolved power, marketisation continues to be defined by a centralised and prescriptive funding methodology – and this has a number of consequences. Of foremost significance, it appears to favour NPM approaches to management within FE providers – approaches that have been labelled "managerialist" within literature on FE (e.g. Dhillon *et al*, (2011), Literacy Study Group (2008), Randle & Brady (1997)).

Knowledge production and FE
Managerialism is an integral feature of the marketisation of the sector and, as a means of mediating working cultures and managing colleges, has spread in answer to FE providers' 'accountability' for resources (Gleeson & James, 2007). This knowledge production role also impacts on college cultures. Wallace and Hoyle (2005: p. 9) have argued that:

> [Managerialism] is underpinned by an ideology which assumes that all aspects of organisational life can and should be controlled. In other words, that ambiguity can and should be radically reduced or eliminated.

Leaving to one side the assumption about controlling 'all aspects' of organisational life, the drawbacks of this 'radical' reduction and elimination of ambiguity are myriad and suggest profound epistemological consequences - of particular interest in this paper, in the communication of complex data between 'market stakeholders': the government, the public and the colleges. The implication of Wallace and Hoyle's comment above is that the graduated complexity of phenomena in the lifeworld can be presented in reductive 'black and white' terms. The broader educational policy context suggests in addition that meaning can be controlled for specific purposes and uses. Developing this idea further, we see the knowledge production processes that are so much a part of the culture of NPM as being governed by managerialist positivism. Managerialist positivism equates to the purposeful production and representation of data that deliberately excises inconvenient truths better to serve the interests of individuals / institutions acting within the "fitness landscapes" (Walby 2003, p9) of the marketised public sector. At the policy level, managerialist positivism functions to provide and impose quantitative wholeness on the unfinished totality of the present for the (political) purposes of policy-intervention and the allocation of financial resource. This ideological and cultural perspective underpins the knowledge production activities of the FE sector as part of a wider ideological project that legitimises the totem of instrumentalism. Our view is that managerialist positivism, the ideological veil that characterises NPM, normalises the representation of complex sociological and qualitative phenomena in reductive and numerical forms. In the current context of budgetary restraints and cuts in public expenditure, managerialist positivism has assumed an aura of orthodoxy.

The emergence of 'performativity' (Ball, 2003) is a key example of managerialist positivism shaping social practices. Ball (2003: p. 215) describes performativity as a culture that 'requires individual practitioners to organise themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations, to set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation'. Performative responses are evident both at the level of the individual and at institutional level; they evidence internalised market practices and suggest a high-stakes environment where there is an awareness of the potentially punitive financial nature of accountability. In this way, performativity has become an effect of managerialism as teachers and colleges adopt practices that present their 'outputs' – often in statistical or quantitative forms in a favourable way. But these practices can also extend to the fabrication of 'outward-facing' market data for audiences such as Ofsted or potential students. This once more links back to marketisation and can be viewed as a symptom of the importation of cultures of entrepreneurialism into education (see for example Literacy Study Group, 2010; O'Leary 2012, Perryman, 2009).

The focus of this article is the impact of managerialism and its positivist structuring of knowledge on the emerging (professional) identities of student teachers on the threshold of qualification. This article centres on a research project that conceptualises knowledge and knowledge production in a way that contrasts with knowledge production practices that

have come to characterise the FE sector and to shape the communication and relationships between government, colleges (and teachers and managers within colleges), the public and FE students. While managerialism in colleges relies on "the extensive use of quantitative performance indicators" (Randle and Brady 1997, p125) and emphasises "the assertion of managerial control and the managers' right to manage" (*ibid*. p125) using these features to develop an understanding of phenomena and produce knowledge, this project focuses on qualitative data and seeks to highlight the voices of participants - in this case student teachers of SfL. Our study sought to illuminate the impact of NPM practices at a time of austerity in FE settings and to recount the untold stories that lie behind the data presented in policy documents and official figures. In other words, the study aimed to disrupt the smooth generation, exchange and presentation of data between sector providers and government that has been established as fundamental aspects of the FE market.

Methodology
This article draws on data from two sources: i) pre-service student teachers whose course involved them two days a week in placements in FE colleges as teachers of Literacy, ESOL or Numeracy and ii) in-service student teachers who were already employed in the sector and were studying for a Literacy, ESOL or Numeracy subject specialist qualification part time. As such, the article explores the meaning of NPM as manifested in the FE sector in England through the eyes of student teachers some of whom already had experience of working in the sector – usually on a sessional, part-time basis.

We adopted a ground-up, participatory model of gathering data that focused in a qualitative way on the lifeworlds of individuals. The sample comprised individuals who were either working (in the case of in-service students) or 'placed' (in the case of pre-service students) in thirteen different FE providers, including eight large colleges in the West Midlands, two Adult Education services, two training providers and a community organisation. The research data this paper draws on was collected between February and June 2011. The participants were students on pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes at the University of Wolverhampton in the academic year 2010-2011.

The study arose from a perception on the part of the researchers, following government announcements on future funding cuts for FE, that regionally the impact of such cuts was likely to be significant. This perception formed in response to a number of entries that had begun to appear in students' journals reflecting on developments in their placements / workplaces. The intention was to build on these first pieces of evidence and to gather data in a more systematic way across the two cohorts. This was achieved through the distribution of a series of prompts (see below) relating to the impact of policy and funding changes on participants and their workplaces. Developed through the critical reflective practice at the heart of their teacher education courses**,** participants' reflective journal entries were used as the main data collection tool. The following prompts were given to these student teachers to act as a platform for their thematically focused journal entries:

- What has been the impact of policy (and funding) changes in the departments you are working in? Can you describe the mood/atmosphere?
- What do you see as the impact of these changes in the coming year in your subject/department?
- What has been the impact of these issues on you and your development as a SFL teacher?

There were twenty nine responses from a total of fifty nine participants, thus the response rate was approximately fifty per cent. Eighteen of the participants were female. The initial data was then analysed to establish emerging themes. The emergent themes and preliminary analysis were then returned to the participants, requesting further comment.

Significantly, the anonymity of those contributing their views in the study was crucial. This is explicable through an understanding of how a NPM climate governs 'voice' in FE settings. In institutions that are in the grip of the annual funding and policy cycle as detailed above and whose culture is honed to the exigencies of the marketplace, a teacher who speaks in negative terms about their experiences is putting their future employment at risk. In a period of redundancies and restructuring within the sector, the risks may be greater still. This was not unfamiliar territory for either of the research team. Both researchers had been positioned as researcher in the 'field' of FE for a number of years. Both had accumulated extensive experience of teaching and researching in FE contexts and this, together with a knowledge of the terrain garnered from long term observations across a number of years in the sector, informed the perspectives brought to bear on the data.

Given the context detailed above, we see a resonance with Foucault's notion of *parrhesia* in this methodological approach (see Foucault (1983) and Lawlor and Sholtz (Undated). That *parrhesia* or speaking for others, frankly and fearlessly, should be a principle of research (and for researchers) in FE is indicative of the 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1980) that have become established in the sector. Foucault believed that knowledge was a social product created by a number of connected mechanisms. These mechanisms of knowledge production act as what he referred to as 'apparatuses of control' to establish certain forms of knowledge as more legitimate than others and that those with the greatest command of such mechanisms are able to create 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1980, p102). Regimes of truth are 'the types of discourse which [society] accepts and makes function as true' (1980, p131). For Foucault *truth* is not to be understood in the conventional sense as an empirical fact proven and accepted to be true by society, but as a notion that is 'linked in a circular relation with systems of power that produce and sustain it' (2002, p132). These systems of power determine the *rules* or the 'ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements' (*ibid.*). Regimes of truth emerge from the connections formed between these dominant discourses. In paraphrasing Foucault, Brookfield (2005, p138) states that 'dominant discourses inevitably reflect and support existing power structures'. Thus the dominant discourses of managerialist positivism have a normalising effect on the process of knowledge production.

Data Analysis

We identified six key themes in the data and we have explored the thematic strands of cultures of fear and managerialism / performativity in a previous publication (see O'Leary and Smith 2012). In this paper therefore, the intention is to focus on themes that centre on how NPM manifests itself through particular approaches to knowledge and knowledge production and the impact of these on the emergent professional identity of this group of student teachers. The analytical themes chosen, in each case illuminates the central role of knowledge in key areas. The first section focuses on how the policy palette over-paints nuanced local knowledge and how the churn of policy locks colleges into a "fitness landscape" in which they "co-evolve" (Walby 2003, p9) with other market providers. The second section centres on how funding-centredness shapes knowledge production (in terms of public representations of student achievement) while impacting negatively on teaching and learning. The third section weighs up policy pronouncements relating to colleges' activity in meeting community need against the participants' experiences. Finally, we look at the tensions generated in FE student teachers' emergent professional identities as they respond to the exigencies of NPM in a time of austerity and the uncritical self-abnegation that seems to be required. One serendipitous reason for focusing on this final thematic strand is the advent of the Lingfield Report of 2012 that questioned the need for FE teacher qualifications and initiated another review of standards in Initial Teacher Education to add to the existing 'barrage' (Lucas, Nasta and Rogers 2012, p677).

Local Knowledge and the Policy Palette

The first of the themes we will look at that provides a sense of how NPM impacted on the experience of student teachers in FE settings relates to the flux of policy, its impact on the working lives of FE teachers and how it contributes to their sense of powerlessness. There is widespread acknowledgement that FE has been subjected to 'almost continuous government reform' (Lucas *et al*. 2012 p677) whether that be in the area of teacher education or, more broadly, in terms of funding arrangements and the curriculum (Smith 2007a and others). In November 2011, John Hayes, Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, gave a succinct overview in a speech to the Association of Colleges (AoC):

> (I)n the FE sector new beginnings have never been in short supply. Over the last
> 10 years we've had four skills strategies, two FE strategies and the Leitch
> Review. Three Acts of Parliament, the old LSC agenda for change. And
> countless Secretaries of State, and even more FE Ministers. (Hayes 2011)

This perception of flux has been echoed by voices from within the sector. In the Foreword to the report *Adult further education – the unfinished revolution* (Fletcher 2011), Alison Wolf (author of The Wolf Report in 2011) comments:

> Two years ago, in *An Adult Approach to Further Education,* I wrote that the FE system in England had become subject to unprecedented levels of central government regulation and control; and that such regulation was not just ineffective but positively harmful. In particular, it had forced colleges to neglect the needs of individual adults and local employers in favour of arbitrary targets set by officials and the latest directives from Whitehall.

The data from our study resonates strongly with these perceptions. The imposition of funding cuts is viewed as another and more severe incidence of the continually changing policy agenda. In the academic year 2010-11, the main policy shift - expressed in changes to funding - was a move away from adult provision in favour of 16-19 provision. This shift can be traced back to the achievement of 'skills' targets for adults. The key feature we wish to focus on in this section relates to the link between knowledge production and funding for colleges. We have looked critically at the funding methodology elsewhere (O'Leary and Smith 2012, p438-9) - and the extent to which funding according to 'success rates' leads to "teaching to the test", "spoon-feeding" and "fabrication" has been written about extensively (e.g. Literacy Study Group 2008, Edwards and Smith 2005, and see Fletcher 2011, cited below); but the use of this performance data as the basis for evidence-based policy making has received less scrutiny. The data suggests that this knowledge production process can also be seen to disguise significant effects 'on the ground'. Michaela, an in-service teacher of Literacy, provided a commentary on the overall effect of the shift away from funding for adults:

> The policy shift within college as a consequence of the collective funding cuts has led to the college selectively targeting particular business groups in order to secure short term support at the expense of retaining a long term overview.

Here, Michaela referred to a key feature of the FE market – the year on year instability that characterises localised FE curriculum offers - and the NPM response to this – a reactionary short-termist budgetary focus that has taken on the aura of virtue and come to be known as 'responsiveness'. The suggestion here is that at an institutional level a long term and presumably broader "overview" of the further education provided by the college in question is occluded by the immediate budgetary demands of the present. This disillusion with the policy maelstrom surfaced in over three quarters of the participants' responses, revealing a perception that centralised policy is an imposition from outside that disrupts localised continuity and interferes with teachers who are knowledgeable about the local needs of their students and who see their ability to address those needs being compromised. Michaela provided an example of this when she talked about the impact of the proposed change in funding allocation towards the 16-19 age group:

> The college traditionally serves one of the most deprived areas in the country and almost two thirds of our learners are adults. Our obligation is to serve our local community and clearly our ability to do this will be severely diminished. On the one hand we are being told there is reduced need for delivering Skills for Life and Work, and upskilling families and local community members. On the other

> hand the impetus has been placed upon providing apprenticeship training, even though there is clear knowledge that no jobs exist within the local area for the specific apprenticeships which are currently being promoted.

What is immediately striking about the passage is Michaela's clearly defined sense of the meaning of her work and the relevance of it within the local context. This local knowledge is disengaged and devalued as policy makers apply a layer of nationally policy that obscures local circumstances. So in circumstances in which a college has been focused on addressing the skills and employment needs of the local adult population, a changed policy priority - backed by a funding adjustment - has required a curricular shift towards 16-19 provision and apprenticeships. Stronach *et al* (2002) have written about a tension between local ecology and local economy. We would rather emphasise the disconnect between the localised *episteme* and centralised policy prescription founded on managerialist positivism. The policy prescription in this case appears to have little relevance to the local context and to amount to an ineffective e intervention in supply side economics (Keep 2006) which ignores the demand aspect of the local employment market.

Michaela is not alone in having a view on this policy directive. Gena, another in-service teacher expresses similar frustrations:

> Budget preparations are currently taking place at College X for 2011/12 onwards. The college had cuts of 3 million in 2010 in the Adult Responsiveness area and further reductions of £6m are expected over the next 4 years. 16-19 funding - including NEETs - will continue to be a priority, Train to Gain will be removed - probably fully by early 2012 and Apprenticeships activity across all ages - especially 16-19 - will be prioritised.
>
> The impact of the policy and funding changes in the department that I am working is causing tutors confusion, anxiety and uncertainty. … VT tutors are hastily applying for internal and external job vacancies to gain an employment contract. However, there are not many contracted vacancies arising, resulting in trainee teachers like myself facing a bleak future.

This passage demonstrates the big financial implications of policy churn for an individual college. The change requires structural adjustment: constriction in some areas and expansion in others. This requires a flexibility of conditions of employment that was fought over on a college by college basis throughout the 1990s (Smith 2007, p34). Gena's comments also illustrate the economisation of consciousness that is characteristic of FE teachers after twenty years of managerialist practices. At its simplest this is exemplified by a broad understanding of funding streams and the impact of these on college courses. This knowledge is essential for staff linking as it does to their security of employment. But what is also powerfully conveyed is Gena's detailed knowledge of how policy emphases determine levels of funding and how these are subject to on-going change.

While one key theme from the data centres on the policy churn and its imposition irrespective of local conditions, it is important to note that localism – at least at the level of rhetoric – is championed by policy makers. This is illustrated in the same speech by Hayes:

> I'll do all I can to see that you get the funding you need, but each of you, all of you are uniquely sited about how best to spend it to meet the needs of your local areas. My view matters, but I'm certain yours matter more… Localism is being aware of your community's needs, sensitive to its roots, careful about its future; feeling for the people around you, their prospects and their welfare, knowing that your fulfilment is bound to their well-being. (Hayes 2011)

Despite such assurances, our data suggests that in the FE market – in the West Midlands region at least - local decisions that are geared towards meeting funding requirements in a way that benefits the college-as-independent-financial-institution take priority over the "prospects and welfare" of colleges' local communities. While the achievement of targets in adult SfL provision lubricated funding cuts, specifically the imposition of budgetary constraints imposed on colleges as a consequence of the Comprehensive Spending Review, it's important to acknowledge that FE staff have become inured over two decades to the policy churn and that this is a recognisable and distinct feature of FE. The perception is that colleges are perpetually trapped into reinventing themselves in the light of the latest policy fad and, what Keep (2006) refers to as policy makers 'playing with the biggest trainset in the world', enacts a model of governance which discourages the active participation and application of local knowledge by FE institutions and teachers. In the light of this, NPM becomes a label that describes a reactive, myopic and deracinated institutional response to the marketised FE environment.

What characterises FE in England with regard to the frequent reboots of the policy agenda is how these appear directly to shape timetables and staff workloads. A second policy area that surfaced in the data illustrates this. Following on from the New Labour 'Flagship' qualification, the 14-19 Diploma, a new course which was designed to provide a bridge between vocational and academic qualifications, the introduction of Functional Skills (FS) appears in the data as another policy initiative that is causing disruption and uncertainty in teachers' work. The vintage of this policy provides a telling picture of just how disruptive the use of the policy palette can be. While the Diploma was launched almost five years ago and signalled a dramatic development in the vocational curriculum offer for 14-19 year olds, five years on, a historical perspective might be that as a policy, it never achieved real take-off. A tentativeness about its extension beyond vocational subjects and a change of government contributed to its demise. Effectively, this resulted in piecemeal development in colleges. Although fortune favoured the cautious, the FS element of the policy morphed coincidentally with the achievement of SfL targets into a new set of baseline qualifications. Unsurprisingly, these policy manoeuvres underpinning FS were experienced as confusing by the study's participants. Fenella, a pre-service Literacy student commented:

> Vocational tutors are being brought in to take over some Functional Skills classes but they do not understand how to teach these subjects. I fear it is going to cause great frustration for students and there will be a lot of behavioural issues the college must deal with. So much fear is currently being felt by tutors as they must enrol students for exams and they are worried that they may not have chosen the correct levels for them to be assessed at.

While FS pilots began in 2007, the confusion surrounding the introduction of what amounts to a major curriculum reform, compounded by the demise of the Diplomas that FS were originally attached to, was noted by several participants. In the case of FS, the piecemeal layering of one policy over another has a significance at the level of professional identity as the reform originally required subject specialist teachers to embrace responsibility for literacy and numeracy as integral aspects of the delivery of their subject areas. In this case, it appears that the FE market mechanism has failed to produce uniformity or consistency between colleges as local (and financially expedient) solutions have been fixed on. Despite that, for SfL student teachers of Literacy and Numeracy, this policy shift has a powerful bearing on their chances of employability.

John Denham, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills from 2007 to 2009 provides a flavour of the political use of FE policy in the following passage:
> Since the launch of the Government's Skills for Life strategy in 2001, over 5.7 million learners have taken training courses and 2.8 million have achieved nationally recognised qualifications, exceeding our 2010 Public Service Agreement target to improve the literacy, language and numeracy skills levels of 2.25 million adults more than two years early. (DIUS 2009 p3)

This passage is contextually relevant to our study as the achievement of this 'Public Service Agreement target' led to the shift in funding towards 16-19 education in FE. For us, it also illustrates the political *use* of FE policy. In this case, that use involves i) the generation of de-problematised and decontextualized data and ii) – a corollary of this - the presentation of this in the form of the achievement of specific policy objectives that legitimises further policy intervention. The managerialist positivism that informs NPM underpins both aspects.

An example of this is the paradoxical way that funding 'success rates' leads to a narrowing of the taught curriculum, so that while pass levels may increase, say in Level 2 Literacy qualifications, students' ability to continue on to A level English and the 'equivalence' of Literacy at Level 2 to GCSE English are both seriously compromised. In this case, improved pass rates equates to *falling* not rising standards. Managerialist positivism collates these data but refuses to engage with any framing narrative. While the production of this reductive data can be detrimental to the educational processes it purports to be monitoring, it does enable the political activity of policy legitimation. This isn't to dismiss the needs that policies seek to address. For example, the need identified by Moser in 1999 -

that there are approximately 7 million adults in the UK who have "more or less severe problems with basic skills," (Moser 1999 p2) – may well be 'real'; it is just that it is an ongoing need that is more likely to be addressed through a long term, cumulative strategy rather through a short term policy panacea. This connection between 'success' data, funding and the education that students experience in FE is the next theme we will explore.

Knowledge, funding-centredness and accreditation
For the 157 Group (a grouping of 'regionally influential' senior college managers from across England), the centralised control that gives the *raison d'etre* to the FE market is perceived in terms of over-regulation. The funding for FE is described as offering 'perverse' incentives:

> Unlike the funding of schools and universities, the funding of colleges is closely linked to success rates. This has the perverse effect of encouraging colleges to offer courses that are easier to pass or discouraging them from taking on students who might be seen as risky. Students with learning difficulties or disabilities can be particularly disadvantaged by such funding rules. (Fletcher 2011, p9)

This theme is a familiar one from the literature and we will review it briefly here as it reveals more key features of NPM in FE. Gena, an in-service Literacy teacher, described the impact of the cuts on her college:

> At present SfL staff are being worn down with the internal tensions between the national and institutional policies. There are so many pressures and responsibilities for the institution, managers and teachers to gain funding. It is just a process of enrolling students, getting them to achieve as soon as possible and then getting them out.

This contribution illustrates the technicisation of education – a linear, industrial model that views students as a means to accessing funding. We term this *accreditation* as this label distinguishes funding-driven activities which instrumentalise students financially to benefit the college / provider from activities that view students as active participants in an educational process that is at least as beneficial to them in terms of personal development as it is to the college / provider financially. The model of education that sits at the heart of such a process would seem to be one of knowledge transmission or transfer. We would also like to emphasise the importance of time in this formula. Time is an important variable in the commodification of FE (see Sennett in relation to time and corporate culture more generally 2007, p24). Unlike the on-going relationship over several years that characterises a child's career in primary and secondary schools, FE courses are funded according to a set number of hours. This can mean that for the purposes of efficiency and productivity colleges compress the duration of courses. In one of the colleges in the sample, a doubling up of courses: two over sixteen weeks rather than one over thirty two, enabled a greater throughput of students. This kind of strategy signals the "perverse

incentives" mentioned by the 157 Group above. Under the current annual funding methodology, there is an equilibrium to be achieved between the meeting of student need and the fulfilment of the financial needs of the college / provider. NPM is the arena in which the tension that exists here needs to be grappled with. A position of managerialist positivism ignores the need to maintain this equilibrium and consequently fosters an erosion of the educational experience to the level of mere accreditation. Karen, another in-service Literacy teacher provided a detailed picture of this phenomenon:

> Tutors are measured against targets which include retention, achievement and progression and these very targets reward learners for not working and stand in the way of committed learners' progress. (This) case concerns a group of young male learners who are enrolled on a construction course. The majority of the group has poor attendance and very poor timekeeping. It is the norm for them to arrive at college without pens or paper and they are reluctant to engage in any task they are set... Because the learners won't complete homework and don't achieve working independently, the tutor takes more upon himself spoon-feeding the group to meet the requirements of portfolios.
>
> As the tutor has to meet a 100% achievement target, he works hard to ensure that all the necessary portfolio work is produced. The system effectively requires nothing at all from these learners, who, not surprisingly don't value their education... Within this group are two learners who are enthusiastic and who do turn up regularly and… are particularly good at maths and have achieved E3 Functional Skills in numeracy. One of them is keen to achieve L1. However, because the college is credited with achievement for the learner's E3 achievement and stands to lose any credit if he fails L1, the line is that the learner should not be pushed any higher… the system works directly against those who do want to achieve and surely merit educational investment.

This passage provides a concrete example of the phenomenon referred to by the 157 Group above. The significance of this goes beyond a local failure to take account of the maintenance of equilibrium between college and student interests. This example of managerialist target-setting suggests that national funding arrangements can act *against* student interests. From a perspective of managerialist positivism, the 100% achievement rate represents favourable performative data. These data could be used (by a teacher) as evidence of excellence in teaching and learning; they could also be used (by a manager) as evidence to secure funding. When we relate the contrast between this surface message of 100% achievement and the description of the class given above back to John Denham's speech about the Government "exceeding our 2010 Public Service Agreement target", a new and very different picture of what lies behind those statistics begins to emerge. The gulf between the statistic of 100% and the empirical world it purports to represent illustrates the failings of the current funding model. Furthermore, this passage exemplifies the role of NPM in producing knowledge, shorn of context, in an appropriately reductive and quantitative form that feeds directly into the 'performance' of policy by contributing to a distorted picture of what is going on in the sector.

Knowledge, values and the relationship between institutional and community need

An important aspect of NPM as it was experienced by these students in their placements was that it had the power to cut across the values and principles that they brought with them to their role – and which their ITE course encouraged them to sustain and bring to their role as new teachers. As we saw in Michaela's contribution above, many of the student teachers identify strongly with the communities they live and work in. John Hayes's comments above also provide a (rhetorical at least) indication that a rootedness in community is an important and necessary aspect of successful FE provision.

In the context of the funding cuts that featured so largely in the experience of the sample in 2010-11, the reforms made explicit mention of the importance of meeting the needs of communities. In *Investing in Skills for Sustainable Growth* (BIS 2010), clear links are made between the Coalition Government's Big Society policy (loosely a mobilisation of voluntary and charitable organisations to promote community cohesion and address issues of social deprivation) and the funding reforms. Through a "more proportionate and light-touch" quality assurance approach and the use of Minimum Levels of Performance (BIS 2010, p19) that threaten withdrawal of funding if success rate targets are not achieved, Government aims to tackle any college that is "failing to meet the needs of its community" (ibid. p20). Indeed, the spending reforms are presented as an opportunity to improve provision:

> Collectively, these measures will ensure the sector is better able to meet the needs of individuals, businesses and local communities. (BIS 2010, p2)

In the light of this policy frame, it is interesting that participants of the study reported a very different picture regarding provision in 2010-11 as well as their colleges' plans in relation to community provision in the coming year. Hamish, a Numeracy teacher at College X reported:

> Offsite (community-based) courses will also be cut back significantly - the reason given as financial - offsite SfL courses need to recoup £1400 per course to be viable and on average are recouping £600.

This suggests that policy intention overlooks the NPM cultures that pervade FE colleges – which effectively view all provision through the lens of profitability. Community provision retains no aura of the sacrosanct in this regard. A reduction in bureaucracy in this area might paradoxically make it easier to withdraw from provision which from an NPM perspective might appear unattractive as it can require additional resources. An ESOL student teacher, Monika, provided a picture of how the additional resourcing of community-based classes can make them vulnerable when budgets are reduced:

> During the conversation the Manager then suggested that if nursery provision was cut then the class could go ahead! Four out of my 9 learners were mothers with young children so the news was not welcomed by them and as a result they withdrew, thus bringing class numbers down to 5.

> I can see the ESOL service being cut in the community which will give learners less choice of classes in ----shire. Some learners prefer to attend classes in their local community due to cultural reasons and it is these learners that will not access lessons in the future thus leaving a large percentage of the local population without English skills to function in our community.

This passage, focusing as it does on a specific group of students - mothers requiring nursery provision - suggests that local funding-driven decisions regarding college curricula are likely to affect community provision negatively. It is also notable that the groups of students affected by these decisions (ESOL students, students with young children) are groups who experience additional barriers to participation in FE and whose needs one might expect to see championed under a Big Society policy aimed at fostering community and social cohesion. In terms of knowledge production, these groups no longer feature in the discourses of success that typically characterise outward-facing communications between colleges and Ofsted or the public. As such they are absences – aspects of provision whose meaning is ambiguous and which is therefore best excluded.

Colette, an ESOL student teacher of African Caribbean heritage, contributed a reflection which demonstrates how the funding reforms and her placement college's NPM response to them abrades against the community-orientated values she brought to her identity as a teacher:

> I began my training to become an SfL teacher with a sympathy for members of my grandfather's generation who came to the UK… and were denied entry to a professional workforce due to their lack of basic skills. Language is the key to true socialisation and integration for our friends who join the UK from other countries. The (course fee) changes will result in a considerable amount of people being put off learning the language because they will not be able to afford it…. The changes have made me more critical of the system and slightly irritated that the state interest will continue eroding away at community and social cohesion.

Her comments are congruent with those of other participants regarding the impact of funding reforms: that they will result in a withdrawal of community provision. While it may be the purpose of policy documents (such as BIS 2010) to present (sometimes unfavourable) change in a positive light, it seems to us that when those working in the FE sector report policy implementation as yielding results diametrically opposed to what was claimed, the effect is a crisis of legitimation and a breakdown of trust.

To summarise then, despite policy rhetoric, any social and communitarian mission that FE colleges might be expected to champion is at best eroded by NPM culture. The data suggest that NPM inhabits a hegemonic cultural space in an exclusionary way. It assumes a 'common sense', economised perspective that destabilises and marginalises other perspectives and approaches. In this case, business orientation views all provision through a 'value-free' lens that does not register the sociological niceties and ambiguities of

educational need in the community. Measured in a normative way, this type of provision is closed if it draws down less funding when compared to other courses.

What is noticeable here is that areas of provision which under New Labour's Third Way agenda (an ideological attempt to conflate enterprise culture and concerns about social justice) might have been viewed as orientated towards achieving social justice and or equal opportunities – are expendable. This exemplifies the asociological (as well as amoral) aspects of NPM practices. That NPM cultures are orientated more towards meeting the needs of individual institutions rather than the needs of their students (despite fixation on so-called quality assurance procedures) is well documented in the literature (see for example Smith 2007A and 2007B). But that this institutional self-interest might impact adversely on some parts of society more than others is under-researched. Furthermore, it is a concern that such changes to publically funded provision remain hidden by the existing systems of managerialist positivism and that the closure of such courses falls outside current regimes of 'accountability'.

The demise of provision that seeks to address issues of social inequality has a correspondence in the employment practices of the providers in the sample. The sample indicates that in the context of funding reforms there is an increased vulnerability of sessionally paid (part-time) staff. As part time teachers are predominantly female (70% according to DEL figures - DEL 2003, p26) and the data provides evidence that p-t staff are first to lose employment, this clearly suggests that funding reforms and NPM responses are rolling back educational advancements in equal opportunities and social inclusion.

Professional identity and critical knowing
The participants in this study were just completing a teacher education course that uses critical reflective practice to problematise the notion of the professional. The course draws on existing literature to highlight the contested nature of this notion. While we do not have the space here to survey the literature on this theme (e.g. Colley, James and Diment 2007; Gleeson and James 2007; Leathwood 2005; Sachs, 2001; Stronach *et al*, 2002), we do see the theme of participants' emerging professional identity as providing a point of conjunction for the other themes explored so far. We have seen how the local knowledge of student teachers is devalued by external policy imposition; we have seen how funding-centredness produces the illusion of targets being achieved while cutting across teachers' concerns about the real learning potential of students; and we have seen how existing systems of knowledge production in FE do not represent the withdrawal of areas of the curriculum that teachers view as of fundamental value. In this last thematic section we will outline how the data reflected the connection between the emergent professional identities of the participants and the model of knowledge production that underpins NPM in FE – that of managerialist positivism.

Amongst the participants, a concern about the market currency of the qualification they had just gained was prevalent. The casualisation of FE teachers appears to be a key

ingredient in the legitimisation and enforcement of NPM, and for the newly qualified teacher in a year of contraction, this was exacerbated. There was a lot of evidence in the data to show that there was no uniform or universal notion of 'the professional' across institutional boundaries. Instead, each workplace had its own version and this was usually operated upon by institutional NPM strategies. Agathe, an ESOL tutor in a community setting, commented on how the teachers in her organisation responded to a restructuring proposed in her area:

> All this makes me also wonder about my future as a professional working within an educational sector… It has become the painful truth of today's education; it is no longer about educating people, giving everyone an opportunity to learn and grow. It is about generating revenue and hitting targets. The (placement) reorganisation has given me greater understanding of what it feels like to be a tutor in today's educational establishments, where many things are changing rapidly, and how teachers cope (or not) with these changes…. What is found relevant to the profession, especially in the light of changes currently taking place, may conflict with what teachers/tutors personally desire and experience. Such a conflict can lead to friction in the professional identity and, as is the case with many of my colleagues, people often begin to question their commitment to work… it is really difficult to feel optimistic and enthusiastic, but I cannot justify compromising the quality of the teaching and the future of our learners. It is the learners and the students that ultimately keep us in jobs!

The passage above illustrates how funding cuts facilitate the disciplining of teachers to the culture and values of NPM. At the heart of the tension embodied in the FE professional are two conflicting models of knowledge production. When Agathe says, "It is the learners and the students that ultimately keep us in jobs!", she signifies how the FE professional syncretises two distinct and polarised versions of the term. On the one hand, she expresses a feeling that whatever the negative feelings in the workplace, she will still approach her teaching in a dedicated, student-centred way that refuses to see students simply as a means to secure funding; in other words, she refuses to bow to the pressure exerted by NPM culture to take an uncritical part in managerialist positivist knowledge production. On the other hand, she acknowledges how student achievement data underpin the financial security of the institution and of teachers' employment. One aspect of the professional identity on offer to these students appears then to be the necessity of acknowledging the value of institutionally orientated processes of knowledge production over other modes - including pedagogical - with the added insistence that the new entrant take an active (and therefore legitimising) role in producing such knowledge.

Our data suggested that what Ball calls the endangerment of the 'soul' of the teacher (Ball 2002) and Brookfield characterises as an inevitable 'loss of innocence' (Brookfield 1995) for FE teachers resides in the subjugation of self to a specific and reductive regime of truth with its own systems of self-validation. Professional identities in FE are the products of interaction and mediation: between government regulatory intervention and the sector and between individuals and the institutional environment they work in – and underpinned by

funding. These relationships are governed primarily by the exchange of data and the FE professional is forced to become complicit in systems of knowledge production that sustain these relationships. To that extent the FE professional can be characterised as an example of 'state individualisation' (Foucault 1982, p780) disciplined by a marketised workplace and made complicit in state-sanctioned processes of knowledge production. The FE-professional-as-subject then operates at the intersection of national, institutional and personal interests. The classroom identity of the teacher might be predicated on a constructivist model of knowledge production, but teaching and learning as social practice is seen to depend on the higher form of managerialist positivism.

The ITE courses the participants were on champions the notion of practitioners as researchers – promoting critical knowing over and above the systems of knowledge production they encounter in the FE sector. Critical knowing, an extension of critical reflection, distinguishes itself from these forms. In Table 1 below, we have tried to outline the polarities of NPM professionalism and values-based professionalism promoted on the participants' teacher education course and held in tension in the FE-professional-as-subject. The table indicates the centrality of models of understanding and knowledge within this tension.

Critical knowing and the values-based professional	Professional knowing within NPM settings
Sociologically rich understanding of students and their learning	Funding-centred, denuded understanding of students: students instrumentalised
Contextual knowledge vitally important to full understanding	Context subordinated to or superseded by institutional / managerialist myopia
Community orientation: creation of value, skills development and cultural capital requiring long-term, extra-institutional investment	Community as exploitable market opportunity – immediate short term gains essential
Mediation of policy; amelioration of impact on students; policy to be challenged and critiqued	Policy as given; primacy of ability to respond to funding pressures; fatalistic cultural ambience
Student need privileged over institutional data requirements	Institutional data requirements underpin and have precedence over all activity
Personal and nuanced mediation of student need	Reliance on 'quality' systems to address issues around student entitlement
Summative assessment: a constraint, a necessary evil	Summative assessment: of primary importance – required for funding: spoon-feed; create courses where necessary

	to construct pathways of progression
Progression: seen as a consequence of students' development: the taking up of opportunity	Progression: a means to access further funding through retaining students into the next academic year
Nuanced qualitative knowledge production characterised by incompleteness, ongoing engagement; flexible teleology, typically student-centred and notched.	Managerialist positivism: emphasis on quantitative, statistical condensing of complex phenomena; annual cycle (or 'strategically' triennial); short term, end-stopped teleology

Table 1. Contrasting conceptualisations of the FE professional showing the relationship of each to knowledge and knowledge production.

Conclusions

This article has sought to explore the phenomenon of NPM as it is manifested in the FE sector and as it has impacted on the experiences of student teachers on the threshold of qualifying. The study has been genealogical in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault 1993, p202), as it has foregrounded qualitative data drawn from individual experiences while seeking to reveal the networks of power shaping those experiences.

The article has sought to make visible the link between NPM and managerialist positivism - a reductive ideological perspective that rejects the idiosyncrasies of context and insists on the meaning and continuity of numerical data generated by colleges as constituting the real history, the *quidditas* of FE. When used in a context in which a 'skills' discourse has hegemonic resonance and an instrumentalist purpose for education goes widely unquestioned, managerialist positivism operates within a closed feedback loop: market mechanisms enforce specified knowledge production by institutions and this activity acts as a ritual of institutional self-legitimation (maintaining or driving up standards) while also providing raw data that justifies further intervention in an endless cycle.

From the data we have gathered it seems that NPM also works on the individual to produce particular ways of being and knowing. A specific relationship with time is insisted upon: one which immerses the consciousness in a perpetual, luminous present; one in which knowing is reduced to in-the-moment responsiveness to market pressures; one which disables and devalues judgement based on sociological (or moral) insights connected to the past and that seeks short term gratification in the present; one in which the future is viewed primarily in terms of another annual cycle of uncertainty, risk and calculation and the management of these. Furthermore, NPM refocuses the teacher's (and manager's) gaze away from local or regional concern, cutting the umbilicus between FE providers and their communities and instead prioritising a link between them and the centre.

Qualitative studies like this one go against the grain of the knowledge production activities that sustain an FE sector in which cultures of NPM predominate and are able to illuminate some of their limitations. We can summarise these limitations like this: the enormously complex and contextualised picture of the outcome of a large number of students engaging with FE, attending classes and undertaking assessments can be represented through numerical data only; but to do this risks omitting crucial contextual considerations (for example, local community landscapes, responses to funding incentivisation, performativity and the fabrication of data by colleges, the narrowing of the curriculum through 'teaching to the test', the marginalisation and closure of community-based and other financially unattractive provision - which can radically subvert meaning.

Our data support the findings of other literature on managerialism in FE and suggest the significant short-comings of managerialist positivism as a basis on which to formulate policy. A key recommendation arising from this is that knowledge production in FE needs to move beyond the limitations of managerialist positivism to deploy a more nuanced and rigorous model that embraces contextual and qualitative data. While these limitations remain, the current marketised, NPM model of knowledge production creates an environment in which 'evidence-based' policy making becomes a tendentious way of mobilising knowledge production for political ends rather than making a meaningful and sustained contribution to improving the experiences and opportunities for both staff and students in the sector.

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