

The Long Shadow of Incorporation: the Further Education Sector in Devolved Wales

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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that colleges of further education, that is, the managers, lecturers and students who work and learn in them, continue to operate under the long shadow of incorporation despite operating in a devolved Wales where a number of changes to governance have occurred. Set against several sector-wide changes are a study of college principals conducted in late 1994 and a study of lecturers conducted in the period June 2005 to October 2006. Their accounts are used to re-consider the 'new-managerialist' approaches and the longer-term impacts of incorporation on what it is like to work in further education today.

Introduction: setting the scene

Following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, as from 1 April 1993 colleges of further education in Wales and England were taken out of local education authority control and, as incorporated bodies, they effectively became independent businesses. This was a part of a broader project of public sector reform combining deregulation, privatization and, in education, local management and marketization. With regard to further education this was about positioning colleges in a competitive market aimed at bringing about efficiency gains at a time of rapid expansion in student numbers. As this paper makes clear, while securing its intended purposes incorporation has given rise to a number of associated unintended and ongoing impacts.

The Long Shadow of Incorporation

Prior to incorporation, policy-making in FE was characterized as 'incrementalist' and piecemeal, that is, it lacked overall direction, and centralized policies tended to be responses to specific problems rather than based on longer-term strategic planning. Policy implementation was diffused and poorly coordinated because of the ways in which further education provision was managed and funded by unconnected LEAs. Unintentionally, the beginning of incorporation coincided with the demise of the Technical Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) and brought to an end these attempts to bring schools and colleges together to work as consortia in the planning of a vocationally relevant 14–19 curriculum. First introduced in 1983 the TVEI was a response to Margaret Thatcher's exasperation at the failings of the education system in meeting the needs of employers and the economy, so that the funding of this initiative effectively by-passed LEAs and was established via the Manpower Services Commission, rather than the Department for Education and Science (DES). With the incentive of increased funding the TVEI encouraged schools and colleges to develop a curriculum that promoted equality, offered work-experience, and employed the wider use of information technology and teaching strategies deemed more appropriate for the 'non-academic' student.

As the purported link between poor education and economic failure became stronger, policy-makers' attention began to focus more on the need to invest in human capital, for the creation of a 'learning society' and as a response to the challenges of globalization. The 1990s were heralded as the 'skills decade' when the Secretary of State for Employment warned of the need for Britain to overcome the challenge it faced from international competitiveness. This was in response to growing concerns that Britain's economic performance was falling behind its major competitors and increasingly the failings of education and training were seen as a prime cause. Comparisons were made with other countries' systems of education and training and the conclusion reached that, in Britain, urgent reform was needed. The establishment of a framework of vocational qualifications 'relevant to the needs of the economy' and based on equal esteem with academic qualifications was called for in the White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES/Welsh Office, 1991) and in 1993 college-based General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) were introduced to complement the existing work-based National Vocational Qualifications.

An approach to driving up standards of education and training was via the setting of National Targets for Education and Training (NTETs), originally

proposed by the Confederation of British Industry in 1991. According to the National Advisory Council for Education and Training Targets (NACETT), an employer-led body set up in 1993, their purpose was to make the country more competitive by providing a better educated and more highly-qualified society (NACETT, 1995). In effect, this was to be achieved by promoting a 'credentialist' approach to both economic and social development (Fuller and Unwin, 1999). The Further Education Funding Council for England (FEFCE) welcomed the consultation on revised national targets. It thought that achieving them would bring about lifelong learning and widen participation and urged NACETT to focus more on the acquisition of higher-level skills. However, as Wells (2005: 1) suggested, the 'endless fixation of "top down" targets brought the use of targets into disrepute'. In the context of basic skills, Wells asserted that they have not achieved long-term change but have resulted in unforeseen outcomes such as cramming, manipulation of figures and quick fixes.

Early responses to incorporation: principals' perspectives

In the period May to October 1994 we interviewed twelve principals of further education colleges in south Wales and three in the south-west of England. We drew on their accounts to identify the ways in which incorporation had begun to change the culture of colleges and to foreshadow a range of concerns emanating from the newly imposed market-driven approach. Our original study, *Principals' Responses to Incorporation: a window on their culture* (Jephcote, 1996), focussed on how these principals experienced the process of incorporation, its impacts on the relationships with schools and other colleges and how colleges were to be viewed as businesses.

Perhaps predictably, the early concerns of the principals in our study were to do with getting in place the arrangements for managing people, property and finance and the focus of their accounts was on the volume of work which incorporation caused them and the ways in which they set about changing management structures and the college culture. At this early stage we noted a growing sense of alienation between managers and lecturers, involving a separation of the managing of colleges from academic and curriculum matters. Changing the structural arrangements within colleges was seen as a means to changing the culture more towards what some principals called a 'commercial environment' and was symptomatic of the move from public sector providers to independent businesses.

The Long Shadow of Incorporation

Principals regarded incorporation as a liberating process in which the separation from the local education authority (LEA) meant that they were more able to openly compete with other colleges and schools. At the same time, many principals recognized the inherent paradox of incorporation. Whereas they had been taken out of the control of LEAs, of which at the time there were 104 across Wales and England, they were now at the mercy of centralized policy-making that could be directed through a single funding body for Wales and another single body for England. Again, at this early stage, principals were reporting to us increased regulation, auditing and control although not all of the implications of this new regime were fully apparent. Principals' fear of the initial impacts of competition depended on their localities. Some wondered about the intentions of some LEAs to give support to schools in their desire to expand sixth forms, providing a direct challenge to what they considered to be an important part of their market. Others were more worried about competition from other colleges and the possibility of merger. In all cases, a casualty of incorporation was the closer relationships which previously existed within and particularly across the sectors together with the weakening of formal and informal networks. Overall, at this time, there was a greater sense of inward than outward looking and a more cautious approach to sharing information and co-operative working practices.

This new order of post-incorporation forced college managers to focus their attention on the recruitment, retention and achievement of students, to which their funding was directly linked. Although there had been a sustained expansion of numbers entering further education the application of the 'more for less' principle applied by the funding bodies, in which the per capita income was reduced year by year, meant that the only way to sustain or expand income was by taking on more students. The added problem was in the poor retention of students and the need for colleges to overcome the high historic levels of attrition across all courses. As a consequence, college managers' concerns were more to do with finance than the curriculum and, increasingly, with providing the information demanded by the funding councils which now based college income not on the number of students but on the number and type of 'learning units' in which they were engaged. Operating with these market conditions uppermost, courses expanded to meet student demand and was met with increased provision in areas such as care, media, and business studies. What was emerging was a growing mismatch between, on the one hand, the 'qualifications market' which responded to funding and student demand-led

provision and, on the other, the needs and operation of the labour market (see Jephcote and Salisbury, 2001) and the economy, ignoring the perceived and so-called 'skills gap'.

New imperatives and changing structures in Wales

In 1999, devolved powers were passed to the elected National Assembly for Wales and the Welsh Assembly Government, including almost all educational policy-making. Hitherto, some believed that Wales 'lacked a distinctive policy-making community' and that policies made in Westminster were applied 'without significant modification'; although soon to change, this was indicative of limited Welsh autonomy where a role of Welsh civil servants was to see 'how faithfully they could apply these to Wales' (Loughlin and Sykes, 2004: 1–2). So, as the foregoing account implies, the Welsh Assembly Government inherited a raft of policies and structures, together with their intended and unintended consequences not of their own making. Post-devolution, a key question to consider, therefore, is the means and extent to which the Welsh Assembly Government can unravel itself from these limitations.

Some matters were already in train. For example, the White Paper *Learning to Compete: Education and Training for 14–19 year olds* (DfEE, 1996) set out the Labour Government's vision for first-class learning to enable all young people to exercise choice and meet the needs of the labour market. From 1997 it set about ratcheting-up standards which it saw as the key to economic success for individuals and the economy, underpinned by NTETs. This was both a continuation and acceleration of existing policy, building on, for example, the Kennedy Report (1997) on further education, the Dearing Reports (1996, 1997) on further and higher education respectively, and the Fryer Report (1997) on continuing education (Tight, 1998). In England, the 1998 Green Paper *The Learning Age: a Renaissance for a New Britain* (DfEE, 1998) saw learning as 'the key to a strong economy . . . the key to prosperity . . . Investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy'. And in Wales, the Green Paper *Learning is for Everyone* (Welsh Office, 1998) marked the need to respond to the 'whirlwind of global economic forces' and the need for Wales to have a 'flexible and multi-skilled workforce' (p. iii).

Also in train was a review of the curriculum conducted in 2000, commonly known as 'Curriculum 2000', which signalled the end of GNVQs in Wales

The Long Shadow of Incorporation

and England. Initially, they were replaced with the Advanced Certificate of Education (AVCE) which has itself now been withdrawn and replaced either with the BTEC and City and Guilds awards, which the GNVQ had originally displaced, or with new applied A levels. GNVQs were discredited by many employers for concentrating on the provision and accreditation of low-level skills and did not achieve parity of esteem, not least because of the failure of the Dearing Review (*Review of Qualifications for 16–19 Year Olds*, 1996) to embrace wholesale change. Although changes were made to the structure and content of post-16 provision, including the introduction of core skills, primacy was given to the A level and the interests of those aspiring to a university education. Consequently, there is a sense in which the common system of public examinations in Wales and England and the needs of an embedded university entrance system limit possibilities for learning, teaching and assessment and post-16 curriculum reform in Wales.

In Wales, the White Paper *Building Excellent Schools Together* (BEST, July, 1997) identified the need for more coherence and less competition and prioritized the need for better collaboration between schools, further and higher education and training providers. The *Education and Training Action Group for Wales* (ETAG) was established to provide strategic direction and went on to publish an *Education and Training Action Plan* (ETAP) (ETAG, 1998) for Wales. New structures to enhance post-16 education training in Wales were introduced under the Learning and Skills Act, which received Royal Assent in July 2000. The Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), known in Wales as Dysg, was formed in November 2000 out of the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA), itself an outcome of the merger in 1995 of the Further Education Unit (FEU) which focused on curriculum issues, and the Staff College which provided training and development for staff in the sector. Dysg worked to improve the quality of post-16 education and training by conducting research to inform policy and practice and through improvement and support programmes for providers. From April 2001, Education and Learning Wales (ELWa) took over the responsibilities of NACETT, and also the FE Funding Council for Wales, thus taking overall responsibility for funding and planning education and training for the over-16s, including sixth forms from April 2002. Its mission was 'to promote lifelong learning and provide world-class learning opportunities for all in Wales to realise their potential' (www.elwa.org.uk accessed 6 March 2006). In part, this was to be achieved by approving and funding improvements in service delivery proposed by Community Consortia for Education and Training (CCETs) and through the

development of collaborative learning networks. From March 2001 the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) were wound up and their functions variously transferred to ElWa, Careers Wales and the pre-existing Welsh Development Agency.

Taken together, these changes were an attempt to overcome the piecemeal and limited scope of previous reform, to bring about partnership at the regional and sub-regional level and to encourage more adults to enter learning provision. The intention was for money available to 'be channelled where it is needed and used in the most efficient way possible' with the purpose of these changes in the structure 'to remove wasteful competition and encourage partnership between different elements of post-16 learning' (ElWa, undated). As we go on to explain, these new structures met with limited success and their functions were later to be absorbed into a single Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills of the Welsh Assembly Government.

However, the decisions taken within the new structures and the working practices associated with them had led to some significant departures from those in England. In the schools sector, Wales had rejected the 'naming and shaming' culture so prevalent in England and abandoned national testing at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3, thus removing the basis on which to construct league tables of school performance for those age groups. In further education, unlike in England, the salary scales for full-time lecturers have been brought into line with those of schoolteachers. By 2010 the development of a National Planning and Funding System (NPFS) will have equalized the levels of funding allocated to those providing post-16 learning, other than higher education. In sharp contrast to the attitudes conveyed by the rejection of the Tomlinson Report in England, in Wales there is more support for a diploma-style award and, more importantly, the wider curriculum experience this provides. From 2003 schools and FE colleges have piloted a 'Welsh Baccalaureate' qualification which builds on existing accredited courses and provides additional components including key skills, work and community based experience and an extended study (see Hayden and Thompson in this volume).

In the meantime, as the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning noted in the foreword to the paving document *The Learning Country: a Comprehensive Education and Lifelong Learning Programme to 2010 in Wales* (National Assembly for Wales, 2001), a 'turning point for education' had been reached. This was the first comprehensive strategic document on education and lifelong learning in Wales. It was also the first on education

The Long Shadow of Incorporation

to set out proposals for legislation, thus marking another significant departure from England. As the Minister noted, 'we shall take our own policy direction where necessary, to get the best for Wales' in realization of her vision that 'Wales should become internationally renowned as a Learning Country: a place that puts learners' interests first'.

Attention was turned to improving collaboration and partnership between schools and colleges, largely prompted by the associated problems of high levels of truancy, disengagement from schooling, crime and later non-engagement in education and training. The publication of *Making the Connections: Delivering Better Services for Wales* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004) called for improved networking arrangements between learning providers to enhance learners' opportunities post-14 and is one of a number of attempts to foster collaboration between schools and FE colleges, and end competition over the provision of vocational learning. Continuing in the vein of the ETAP (1999), Geographic Pathfinder Surveys in six areas of Wales were commissioned by ELWa to indicate the potential for rationalizing the learning infrastructure post-16. The intention was to foster collaboration as a means of increasing choice, secure a coherent policy framework to provide national consistency but with regional flexibility and to develop frameworks that would be responsive to learners' needs.

In April 2006, at the halfway point in the ten-year strategic plan for education and lifelong learning in Wales set out in 'The Learning Country', *The Learning Country 2: Delivering the Promise* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006a) was published as a consultation document. It recorded progress in achieving the policy trajectory set out in 2001 and re-stated commitments up to and beyond 2010. The publication of *The Learning Country 2* also marked the merger of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority for Wales (ACCAC), Education and Learning Wales (ELWa), the Wales Youth Agency, Dysg (the Learning and Skills Development Agency arm in Wales) and the Department for Education and Training to form a single new Department of Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DELLS). This was born out of both a political commitment to bring to an end the power of non-governmental bodies, the number of which had proliferated during the period of the Conservative Party administration from 1979 to 1997, and a desire to create a strengthened capacity for the post-devolution state in Wales in the field of education and lifelong learning. This merger of these non-governmental bodies somewhat pre-empted the publication of the Beecham Report (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006b) which reported on its review of local service delivery. This report noted the ways in which

innovation had been inhibited by a conservative organizational culture and lack of public debate, reflecting an attachment to the status quo. In this regard, it drew attention to the lack of progress in rationalizing provision across school sixth forms, FE and other training providers as a means of improving quality of provision first advocated in the ETAG report in 1999. It also suggested that breaking the link between deprivation and low performance was, in part, dependent on this rationalization and the development of individual learning pathways at 14–19.

In October 2006 the publication of *The Learning Country: Vision into Action* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006c) was an opportunity for the Minister for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills to re-affirm her commitment to the transformation of education and lifelong learning in post-devolution Wales. In post-14 and further education and training there is a strong signal for the need for better collaboration between providers and, for 14–19 year olds, support for the *Learning Pathways* programme which offers enhanced choice and flexibility. Following its external evaluation (see Greatbatch et al., 2006), there is a commitment to ‘roll-out’ the Welsh Baccalaureate at Advanced and Intermediate levels in post-16 education and piloting a Foundation level model parallel with the Intermediate model, with 14–19 year olds from September 2007. It also promises a review of the strategic mission of the FE sector to ‘consider the extent to which FE institutions should focus more clearly on economically useful skills; the extent to which they should specialise; efforts to improve quality; the place of self-regulation and other measures to streamline governance . . .’ The style of this document is reminiscent of the NTETs, and sets outcome targets for key areas. For ‘14–19 Learning Pathways and Beyond’ these are:

- The average points score per 15-year-old pupil for all qualifications approved for pre-16 use in Wales to improve year on year.
- The percentage of 15-year-olds achieving the equivalent of GCSE grade A* to C to reach 60 per cent by 2010 (2007 milestone 53 per cent).
- By 2010, no pupil to leave full-time education without an approved qualification.
- The percentage of 16–18-year-olds in employment, education or training to reach 93 per cent by 2010 (2007 milestone 90 per cent).
- 95 per cent of young people of 25, to be ready for high-skilled employment and/or further or higher education by 2015.

For ‘Beyond Compulsory Education: skills, further education and lifelong learning’ the outcome targets are:

The Long Shadow of Incorporation

- The percentage of working-age adults with level 1 or above basic skills in literacy to be 80 per cent by 2010.
- The percentage of working-age adults with level 1 or above basic skills in numeracy to be 55 per cent by 2010.
- The percentage of adults of working age with a qualification equivalent to level 2 or above to be 70 per cent by 2010 (2007 milestone 67 per cent).
- The percentage of adults of working age with a qualification equivalent to level 3 or above to be 50 per cent by 2010 (2007 milestone 48 per cent).
- The percentage of adults of working age with a qualification equivalent to level 4 to be 30 per cent by 2010 (2007 milestone 27 per cent).

The presentational style of *The Learning Country: Vision into Action* is crisp with bold imperatives which document the Welsh Assembly Government's aspirations for education across all phases. The pivotal role for the further education sector is explicit and it is to the situations and views of FE teachers that the next section now turns.

Further education today: teachers' perspectives

In the period from June 2005 to October 2006 we have been engaged in an ESRC/Welsh Assembly Government Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) project called *Learning and Working in Further Education in Wales*. This is a thirty-month longitudinal study involving teachers and students, due to be completed in October 2007. Here we draw on initial interviews with 27 teachers across seven FE campuses, together with ongoing journal and observational data. We use this to present a composite contemporary picture to provide a useful 'reality check', to remind us of where FE is at and the nature of the embedded problems which new policy directions must overcome if they are to be successful.

Incorporation was based on the neo-liberal belief that competition would increase efficiency. The creation of a quasi-market for students led to competition between providers and, despite encouragement to collaborate, many schools and colleges remain in tense and complex relationships. Our detailed account of the attitudes of FE students and teachers is telling (Roberts et al., 2006). FE teachers told of schools who 'won't let us in' and of a feeling of 'distrust' where young people's choices are limited through ignorance of what is available to them. There was a widespread perception on the part of many FE students and teachers that schools had let learners

down and that schools viewed FE as 'second-best'. Where partnership arrangements are in place whereby schools send pupils to FE colleges for part of their educational experience, such links are often perceived by college staff as a 'last resort option' for those schools who cannot deliver certain curriculum areas.

There continues to be mismatch between the qualifications market and the needs of employers and the wider labour market, an outcome of the urgent need to recruit and retain students. It is, as many teachers perceived, about getting 'bums on seats' and achieving fundable outcome results. Some teachers found this dispiriting and some suspected strongly that students had been enrolled on courses they were not suited to and pointed to high rates of attrition as evidence of this as well as difficulties faced in the classroom. Because of the wide spread of abilities and levels of motivation it was sometimes difficult to teach whole groups, thus making huge demands on the teacher to be imaginative and flexible in their approach. This response, although entirely appropriate, was seen by some teachers as another aspect of their work intensification. So, taken with other pressures such as a reduction in teaching time but more classes to teach, teachers openly talked about the increasingly stressful conditions in which they worked and the ways in which this impinged on their private lives.

There is much evidence of greater work intensification amongst mainstream further education teachers. Those participating in the project gave accounts of their increasing workloads and reported longer working hours, more challenging students and having increased pastoral and administrative duties. Different reasons were offered for the increased demands made on their time: including, punitive funding mechanisms, changes in awarding body specifications, altered marking and assessment processes, changes in the student population and revamped college management and administration structures whose staff colonized teachers' time with their own externally imposed imperatives. Interview, journal and observational data suggest that further education teachers' work has both increased, intensified and extended beyond "just teaching" over the last few years (see Salisbury et al., 2006).

Ongoing cycles of external inspection together with internal audits add to the sense of pressure. One teacher told us how, because of the individual annual review, a student drop out of 25 per cent meant that her highest grading achievable in internal review and an Estyn inspection is a grade 3, regardless of her outstanding examination results where 50 per cent of her remaining students achieved a grade A at A level! Teachers universally find the review and inspection criteria and judgements unhelpful, especially

The Long Shadow of Incorporation

when they have been encouraged to widen participation and include a more heterogeneous student population.

Efficiency, value for money and teacher productivity measures generate pressure to draw down recruitment funding and this means that, in turn, courses at risk (those with low take-up) are prevented from running, thus constraining and channelling students' choices. This inevitably has a wider impact on the character of the further education curriculum so that, for example, courses in languages and courses in economics or history are under threat. In turn, it may well be the case that soon, an adult 'return to learn' student will have but a limited curriculum menu from which to choose in some localities.

Teachers in our study who had recently been promoted were brokering between 'Chiefs' and 'Indians' at the 'chalk face' (see Gleeson and Shain, 1999). Indeed, new roles for new middle managers were challenging because teachers felt that promotion had divided their loyalties. The 'new managerialist' world works to separate manager from 'worker'. 'A manager is this swan-like creature gliding around the college with a clipboard whilst underneath 20 or so lecturers are paddling like hell to maintain equilibrium, to keep the show on the road' (Huw G, 3D design, College C). Hostility to college management systems was evident in interviews across all three colleges where some individuals displayed a tendency to resent and blame 'those at the top' indiscriminately. Excessive bureaucracy and constant requirement for paperwork in different formats was described by one experienced head of department as 'the demoralising aspect of the job for *everyone* in FE'. A lack of clarity, and sometimes confusion, existed about whether the origins of some directives lay in the Welsh Inspectorate, the funding arm of the Welsh Assembly Government, awarding bodies or the college senior management team itself! Moreover, teachers' views of being 'over managed' give rise to tensions between what is seen as important with regard to managerial preoccupations and academic leadership. The new managerial values of efficiency, compliance and flexibility are much in evidence and leave both established and newer teaching staff feeling vulnerable and exposed. This added to the feeling of deprofessionalization and growing conflict between 'managers' and 'worker' (see Gleeson, 2001) and a continuing separation of academic from management concerns (see Jameson, 2005; Salisbury et al., 2005). Yet teachers are required to adopt the corporate identity and share ownership and responsibility. Some teachers feel that their contribution is unnoticed and undervalued. In an interview following one teacher's annual review meeting (where managers gave her

printouts and analysis of teaching quality, students' evaluations, retention, and attainment), she was clearly upset by the footnotes to some tables which specified her targets for 2007;

'I work so damned hard with them. I'm always patient – even when I feel furious inside – I prepare really detailed notes and model answers and exam materials for them. Sometimes I could scream when they don't bother to bring their books to class or haven't looked at the course work guidance. But you can't can you?' She says that she really cannot work any harder or give any more of herself to the job.

(Deb Polgaise, Gen. Ed., College A)

Teachers are asked to take on more and more roles and a wider range of teaching to make up new contracts. Some have to teach more lessons by reducing the overall time available, in what was called the '50 minute hour'. Impacts are not just on work roles and patterns but also on pedagogy, the what is taught and how it is taught, including cramming in academic subjects and to the employment of transmission modes of teaching and learning. A reduction in teaching contact hours for courses and the requirement to build in key skills and Welsh Baccalaureate units across some subject courses, coupled with continuous cycles of external and internal monitoring, made many teachers feel overstretched and generally overwhelmed. External and internal verification processes were universally described as heavily bureaucratic and unnecessary. Teachers bemoaned the lack of trust and sense they felt of being permanently under 'surveillance'. An experienced engineering teacher summed up the common feeling well:

'When I started teaching all [student] work was either posted off to a moderator or they visited us, and I had full secretarial support. Now its all IV [Internal verification] and EV [external verification] and there's just a complete lack of trust. It really undermines our sense of professionalism and makes masses of work for everyone.'

(Wyn Venables, Engineering teacher, College C).

Concluding remarks

The accounts from our two studies are a salutary reminder of the fact that regardless of any benefits, the removal of colleges of FE from LEA control has not meant an end to external, bureaucratic and sometimes contradictory demands placed on it by government and its agencies. Nor have the last ten years or so marked any significant shift from the pre-existing patterns of

The Long Shadow of Incorporation

piecemeal and incremental change, although at least in Wales there appears to be more of an appetite for a strategic review of the FE sector. Indeed, as we prepared this paper, November 2006 marked the announcement of the Welsh Assembly Government's commissioning of *An Independent Review of the Mission and Purpose of Further Education in Wales* under the steerage of Sir Adrian Webb (Dydg, 2006). Unlike the 2005 Foster Review of English further education (Foster, 2005) the forthcoming Webb Review will 'be holistic and incorporate an analysis not just of FE institutions but an evaluation of the wider role of the sector in relation to developments in 14–19 education and training, higher education, the Leitch Review on skills, workplace and adult learning' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006: 2). The review remit is wide-ranging and includes an investigation into comparative European and international strategies for the delivery of skills; the role of the sector in the delivery of higher education as well as the more typical functions currently exercised by publicly funded bodies in respect of further education and training.

Our two research studies span a ten-year period straddling the establishment of parliamentary devolution in Wales. As yet, changes in relation to the macro-level management of the FE sector have been largely structural. Initially, these were modifications of structures implemented in England. Indeed, the nature of our accounts and what they point to are largely concordant with those depicting experiences of and views about FE in England (see, for example, Gleeson, 2001, 2005; Jameson, 2005; Lumby and Foskett, 2005). This would suggest that, as yet, it is difficult to discern direct impacts of devolution in the minds of those who work in FE. Rather, what mostly continues to impact on their working lives and pervade their accounts is what we have termed 'the long shadow of incorporation'. More incremental change is likely only to add to the perceived burden of work and any change must be careful not to alienate or marginalise further those teachers who see themselves as significant stakeholders.

The merger of pre-existing bodies into the single Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DELLS) in April 2006 is a development that will continue to attract much attention. Given the relatively small size of Wales this would seem to be a prudent move and offer a better chance for the Assembly Government in partnership with other stakeholders to take the sort of 'active leadership role' called for by the *Beecham Review* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006b) where 'progress depends on joint planning and delivery' (p. 61). As the report suggested, this requires strategic leadership, 'not micro-management' and the need to ensure that 'national

strategy is implemented locally' (p. 61). Clearly, the opportunity for creative leadership from within the newly formed DELLS may help to forge more unique 'made in Wales' policies tailored to the nation's education and training needs.

What has to be remembered is that the repositioning of managers and teachers and the very real workplace tensions that this has generated are not of their own making, but an outcome of the wider changes in the further education sector. Despite regional disparities, Wales' relatively small size should mean that there is a greater propensity for those who are responsible for the evaluation and shaping of policies to listen to the views of professionals. Currently, many further education practitioners are not wholly convinced that the geographical pathfinder approach will radically ameliorate the identified problems. There is a concern that it may simply offer 22 different local authority solutions to what are more fundamental and common issues in what, after all, is a comparatively small country. Too much emphasis on reconfiguring a 14 to 19 phase may lose sight of, and give insufficient thought to, concomitant issues such as teacher training and supply and staff development. Moreover, this dominant focus may well be at the cost of giving more attention to the wider body of learners that characterize the further education student population. It is timely that the Minister's recent promise (made on 26 October 2006) of a thoroughgoing policy review of the mission and purpose of the further education sector in Wales is already underway.

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The Long Shadow of Incorporation

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