Balancing the needs of policy and practice, while remaining authentic: an analysis of leadership and governance in three national school leadership colleges

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ABSTRACT

The contribution that school leadership can make to school and teacher quality – and thereby to pupil learning – is widely recognised. Pressures on school leaders have increased in recent years, as a result of increased accountability and higher expectations from policy as well as wider societal, economic and technological changes. In response, a number of school systems have established national leadership colleges with a remit to improve the supply and quality of leadership. This article analyses how such national colleges are established and operate in the context of wider system governance, with a focus on examples in England, Scotland and Singapore. It is informed by a review of literature and interviews with current and former chief executives (CEOs) of the three colleges. Critics argue that these national colleges represent a form of 'institutionalised governance' (Gunter and Forrester, 2009: 349), a mechanism for enacting hierarchical policy reforms through the creation of a willing cadre of officially approved front-line leaders. Alternatively, viewed through the lens of complexity theory (Burns and Koster, 2016), these colleges can be seen as a means to align policy and practice and to enhance system and professional learning. This article finds evidence to support both lines of argument, but also highlights differences between the three colleges, for example in their relationship with policy and in their operating models. For example, while Singapore's settled policy environment means that the director can focus on working productively with policy makers, the two

UK CEOs must navigate more volatile policy landscapes, requiring them to engage more actively with both policy and practice at the same time. Balancing these demands can be difficult, and whilst there is some evidence that the colleges can support system alignment and improvement, they are subject to political demands and changes which can compromise their role and potential impact.

Key words: school leadership, leadership development, school system reform, national college for school leadership, Scottish college of educational leadership, National Institute of Education.

Introduction

School leadership and leadership development have become a central focus for policy makers, researchers and practitioners in school systems around the world in recent decades (Pont et al., 2008; Barber et al., 2010; Breakspear et al., 2017; Jensen et al., 2017). This increased focus on leadership derives from a range of related developments in school–system governance and reform, including the move towards greater school–level autonomy, but the core rationale is that high–quality leadership is an essential ingredient for high–quality schools (Day et al., 2009; Leithwood et al., 2006).

School leadership may be a key ingredient of school quality, but the impact of leadership on pupil outcomes is largely indirect. For example, Day et al. (2009: 2) found that school leaders 'improve teaching and learning and thus pupil outcomes indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment, teaching practices and through developing teachers' capacities for leadership'. This quote highlights four important aspects of leadership that makes a difference to pupil outcomes in schools. First, it operates as a process of influence, rather than relying on positional power, and so is critically dependent on relational trust, which can be developed through a combination of personal integrity and competence (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Daly and Chrispeels, 2008). Secondly, it impacts on staff motivation by working to generate a shared vision and set of values across the organisation – sometimes described in terms of 'setting direction' or transformational leadership. Thirdly, it is focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning, a process of

learning-centred (or instructional) leadership which Southworth (2009) characterises in terms of modelling, monitoring and dialogue. Fourthly, leadership in these schools is shared and distributed, with a collective focus on improving the quality of learning for all students.

While these four features are particularly important in making a difference to pupil outcomes, leaders must not neglect the wider aspects of organisational management, such as resourcing strategically and creating an orderly and supportive environment (Robinson et al., 2009). Equally, leadership is contingent on context – what works in one school may not work in another – and so leaders must be exquisitely aware of how to read and adapt their leadership to different contexts, including by engaging productively with parents and wider local communities (Riley, 2016; Gronn, 2003). Finally, globalisation, technological developments, policy-driven changes and the constant evolution of research into aspects of pupil learning and pedagogy all require that leaders must be effective in responding to and leading innovation and evidence-informed change (Greany and Maxwell, 2018).

Most of the school systems around the world that participate in international benchmarking studies such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS have a national or provincial strategy and associated capacity for improving the supply and quality of school leadership. These strategies generally focus initially on defining national standards and competency frameworks for headteachers, which are then addressed through a combination of pre-service, induction and/or in-service programmes and qualifications for headteachers. These programmes and qualifications can be mandatory or non-mandatory, although the direction of travel seems to be towards making them mandatory. Many systems also support wider groups of leaders and sometimes provide other programmes and services, such as: improvement and enquiry projects, online and regional networks, mentoring/coaching, conferences and events, and published research and resources (Pont et al., 2008; Barber et al., 2010).
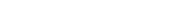
A small number of studies have compared and evaluated approaches to leadership development across different school systems, generally with a focus on systems that perform highly in international benchmarking studies (Breakspear et al., 2017; Jensen et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2013; Barber et al., 2010), but sometimes incorporating a broader range of systems (Harris et al., 2016; Fluckiger et al., 2014; Bush and Jackson, 2002).

As yet there has been very little research or analysis of *how* different school systems structure their approach to developing, providing and
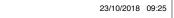
quality assuring their provision for school leaders. This article seeks to address this gap by synthesising existing research and through an analysis of the governance and leadership models adopted by national college in three school systems: England, Scotland and Singapore. The systems were selected based on a review of literature and the author's personal knowl-edge as a result of working and researching in this field over more than a decade.[1] This article was commissioned to inform the development of the planned new national leadership academy in Wales, so the main criterion for selecting the three systems was that they had an established national college that could be studied. Beyond this the aim was to include a range of models (university based, company limited by guarantee, national agency) that were at different stages of development and which reflected a reasonable spread in terms of system performance (primarily in terms of PISA), geography and size. The three examples are illustrative rather than representative; indeed most school systems appear to keep responsibility for school leadership development within the ministry of education rather than within a separate college.

An initial literature search of over sixty databases was undertaken through UCL Meta-Lib and Google Scholar using keywords relating to school system governance, school leadership/management, school autonomy and national school leadership colleges. In addition, for each of the three systems studied, relevant literature and published evaluations, including grey literature, was sourced through the same databases. A cur-rent or former chief executive (CEO) of each respective national college was interviewed in person. The interviews were transcribed and coded using themes that emerged from both the literature and from the data itself. The unique nature of the CEO role means that interviewees could not be offered complete anonymity, but they are not named. Informal discussions were also held with several former employees, trustees or system observers who had significant knowledge of the national college or agency in each of the three systems and this, together with my own experi-ence, helped to enrich my understanding and to deepen the analysis.

The article seeks to map and analyse the ways in which these national colleges have been established and operate in the context of wider system governance and reform processes, drawing on both governance (Bevir, 2011) and complexity theory (Burns and Koster, 2016; Crow, 2004). Critical theorists see the new national colleges as a form of 'institutional-ised governance' (Gunter and Forrester, 2009: 349), a mechanism for enacting hierarchical policy reforms through the creation of a willing

cadre of officially approved front-line leaders. Alternatively, from the perspective of complexity theory, the colleges can be seen as a means to bridge historic divides between policy and practice, helping to secure alignment and to enhance feedback loops between different layers of a system, whilst also enhancing the quality and impact of professional and student learning.

These very different interpretations highlight the contentious and complex task facing leaders of national leadership colleges. They must operate at the interface between policy and practice, funded and controlled by the state but charged with engaging and supporting practitioners to achieve collective priorities. This article is essentially focused on understanding how the CEOs of these three leadership colleges tread this tightrope and how their different governance and leadership models enable them to do that. It asks three questions: how do these CEOs manage their relationships with policy and practice? What are the challenges involved in leading national organisations in complex education systems and how do they differ between systems? What are the lessons and implications that can be drawn from their experience, including in terms of the skillsets required and the ways in which leadership development can be designed and provided?

This article finds evidence to support both a critical and more pragmatic line of argument about the role of national colleges. It also highlights differences between the three colleges, for example in their relationship with policy and in their operating models. Balancing the competing demands they face can be difficult for the three CEOs and the vagaries of political change mean that one college has now closed and another has been merged into a larger agency, so the article concludes by reflecting on the implications for policy and practice.

Leadership in complex education systems:
new challenges and new forms of governance

The introduction suggested that the core rationale for focusing on the supply and quality of school leadership is because it is essential for high-quality schools. This rationale may be simple but it is also simplistic, so it is worth exploring the wider trends that have raised the profile of, and pressure on, school leadership and therefore influenced the creation of the three leadership colleges.

This section seeks to do that in four parts, which address the following themes. The first explores why school-level leadership has become more

important and also more complex and demanding in recent decades. The second sets these developments in the context of debates on school system governance, while the third builds on this analysis to assess the rationale for creating national leadership colleges. The fourth part briefly reviews evidence on the content and design of leadership development across different school systems.

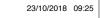*New adaptive challenges for school-level leaders*

School leadership roles are becoming more demanding in many school systems around the world as a result of two linked sets of drivers.

First, education has become more important to policy makers, in particular as globalisation has led to a view of skills and productivity as a key driver of national economic competitiveness (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2008), leading to hierarchical pressures on schools to raise performance in terms of pupil outcomes. At the same time, the rise of international benchmarking studies, such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS, has raised awareness of differences in outcomes across different education systems and has increased the focus on educational quality and outcomes (Mullis, Martin and Loveless, 2016).

Secondly, the challenges facing education are becoming more complex, for example as communities become more culturally and linguistically diverse and as children and families adapt to the use of social media, leading to a need for schools that can meet a wider range of needs and that can respond proactively and creatively to new expectations and requirements. As a result, schools are commonly expected to contribute to equity and social mobility, for example by accelerating progress for the most disadvantaged learners (OECD, 2012). Schools are also being asked to address new challenges, for example to develop citizenship skills or to identify and protect children at risk of radicalisation in the context of the global 'war on terror' (Riley, 2017). In many school systems, schools are also being asked to adapt their curricula and pedagogies in order to reflect the need for new twenty-first-century skills and competencies, such as team work and problem-solving (Pellegrino and Hilton, 2012).

Reflecting these pressures on schools, the OECD has argued that they must become 'learning organisations' (Kools and Stoll, 2016), with sophisticated systems and cultures dedicated to continual adaptive learning and evidence-informed change.

New forms of governance in complex education systems

In response to these issues, policy makers have sought ways to achieve greater flexibility, innovation and responsiveness as well as improved quality in school systems.

How these efforts are interpreted often depends on the standpoint of the observer. Policy debates tend to focus on practical 'what works' questions, such as how to secure consistent school improvement at scale and what can be learned from high-performing school systems (Barber and Mourshed, 2007). Critical theorists highlight the rise of neoliberalism and market models in public education and the ways in which this requires school leaders to operate like private-sector entrepreneurs in a competitive marketplace (Ball, 2011). More applied researchers highlight the flaws in the Global Education Reform Movement (Sahlberg, 2011), where it focuses on the 'wrong drivers', such as an over-reliance on high-stakes accountability (Fullan, 2011), and ask questions such as how to secure alignment across different layers of an education system and how to enable productive learning for all staff and children in schools (Kools and Stoll, 2016; Levin, 2008).

Governance theory offers one way to refocus these debates and to evaluate the ways in which policy structures and leadership agency interact in complex education systems (Greany and Higham, 2018; Bevir, 2011). At one level, it is clear that governments have shifted their approach over time, moving from hierarchical coordination through statutory and bureaucratic control as well as vertical accountability mechanisms, to market models that rely on parental choice and competition to drive improvement, and then, most recently, to network governance through forms of collaboration and partnership. However, the reality is considerably more complex, with the state working to retain overarching control – steer at a distance (Hudson, 2007) – by actively mixing and managing combinations of hierarchy, markets and networks to achieve its goals. For example, while many school systems have increased school autonomy and parental choice and have reduced the role of local bureaucracies, they have simultaneously balanced these market mechanisms with new forms of hierarchical governance, such as new national curricula, tests and inspection regimes.

From this analysis, three implications appear particularly salient for an analysis of school leadership colleges. First, many systems have reduced local bureaucratic control of schools and have increased school-level autonomy and vertical accountability (Suggett, 2015; OECD, 2011). This

approach reflects evidence that school autonomy, in particular over the curriculum and pedagogy, is associated with improvements in outcomes when coupled with clear accountability frameworks (OECD, 2011) and with high levels of professional capacity and leadership (Hanushek et al., 2012). For school-level leaders, however, increased autonomy is often felt in terms of an intensification of their role and a loss of support coupled with increased pressure to perform against measured targets.

Secondly, the mixing and matching of different forms of governance can create tensions and dilemmas for school-level leaders as they seek to respond to and navigate different incentives and priorities. For example, Greany and Earley (2017: 1) refer to: 'a set of contradictions that sit at the heart of education policy in many school systems', while Greany and Higham (2018) highlight the pressure for leaders in England to prioritise their school's organisational interests over the needs of children.

Thirdly, the mixing and matching of different forms of governance has made the job of policy makers in these systems more complex, because they can no longer rely on traditional forms of hierarchical control. As a result there are numerous examples of messiness, ad hocracy and govern-ance failure in contemporary policy (Ball, 2011). In response, Suggett (2015: 17) argues that what is needed from policy makers is 'not older style bureaucracy ... but new systems that can articulate and respond to evidence-based improvement practices, and understand change manage-ment'. Drawing on complexity theory, Burns and Koster (2016) analyse the features of such governance, arguing that it: focuses on processes not structures; is flexible and can adapt to change and unexpected events; emphasises capacity building, stakeholder involvement and open dialogue; takes a whole-of-system perspective by aligning roles and balancing ten-sions; and can acknowledge and manage the risks involved in innovation, both through evidence-based experimentation and through a willingness to acknowledge, and learn from, failure.

Analysing the rationale and approach for developing school leadership colleges

From a policy perspective, the rationale for investing in a national college might appear straightforward, as outlined in the introduction: high-quality school leadership is an essential ingredient for high-quality schools and can make a positive impact on pupil outcomes, but leaders need development and support to achieve this impact, so there is a need for a national leader-ship college to secure high-quality and coherent development pathways for

leaders. In practice, though, these national leadership colleges exist in the context of the complex issues and challenges outlined so far: how to address the changing needs of children and learning in a globalised and fast-changing world; how to counteract the intensification of leadership roles as a result of school autonomy and accountability pressures; and how to resolve the difficult ethical tensions and dilemmas facing leaders as a result of the new governance frameworks?

So it seems there are important questions about the underlying purpose for these national leadership colleges. At one level they can be seen as an example of a reinvigorated state seeking to reassert hierarchical control through a form of 'institutionalised governance', in order to influence the supply, quality and orientation of front-line leaders (Gunter and Forrester, 2009; Thrupp, 2005). In this conception, the colleges are working to embed standardised 'designer' models of leadership (Gronn, 2002), with an ultimate objective to 'optimize and normalize the performance of teachers and school leaders' so that they self-govern their own performance in line with norms of accountability (O'Brien, 2015: 843). By contrast, viewed through a complexity lens, the new national colleges can be regarded as having multiple, overlapping objectives (Crow, 2004), including: a means of building leadership capacity to improve school quality and pupil outcomes in the context of increased school autonomy; an attempt to legitimise and develop leadership agency in the face of complex adaptive challenges and dilemmas; and a mechanism for strengthening system governance and enhancing feedback loops between policy and practice.

Before exploring these different conceptions in relation to the three national colleges, I briefly review the literature on leadership development approaches across different education systems, since enhancing the scale, quality and impact of such provision is a core focus of the colleges studied.

Leadership development in education: a review of key developments and debates

Despite the focus on school leadership by policy makers and researchers in recent decades, there has arguably been less attention paid to how to identify and develop leaders across different contexts. For example, Hallinger (2003) argues that little interest was shown in school-leadership preparation and assessment, except in the USA, before the mid-1990s, while Crow (2006) argues that it is only relatively recently that there has been recognition that the preparation and development of school leaders might make a difference to their effectiveness.

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Where school systems did focus on developing leadership before the late 1990s, it seems that there was relatively little consistency in how they did this. For example, Bush and Jackson found a variety of approaches in their review of fifteen leadership development centres across nine countries, undertaken in 2001. While they did identify a common core focus on either pre-service or in-service preparation for school principals, together with some isolated examples of provision for middle leaders and wider activities – such as research – they nevertheless concluded that 'despite globalization, the striking feature is that nations and states have developed very different models to address their common need for high quality leadership in schools' (2002: 419).

Since that time, a number of studies have analysed the features of leadership development programmes, both within the education sphere and more widely (Breakspear et al., 2017; Jensen et al., 2017; Pillans, 2015; DeRue and Myers, 2014; Barber et al., 2010; Glatter, 2008; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). These studies provide evidence that leadership skills and capacity can be developed through carefully designed programmes and activities and provide useful checklists of the kind of design principles and approaches that correlate most closely with improvement in terms of both the supply of leaders required and the extent to which those leaders report that they have the skills, confidence and capacity required for their roles.

Space does not permit a detailed review of this evidence here, but some headline points that have implications for national leadership colleges are worth noting. First, programmes should be 'philosophically and theoretically attuned to individual and system needs' (Fluckiger et al., 2014), suggesting that national colleges can play a role in translating and addressing these needs. Secondly, leadership development opportunities must be embedded within the day-to-day context of schools, so that leaders are engaged in and reflecting on their contextual challenges and, in the process, are also working to change and improve their organisations. This suggests that national colleges must consider carefully how their provision will integrate with within school processes. Thirdly, programmes should be purpose designed for different career stages, highlighting the need to see professional development as a career-long continuum and to design programmes differently to meet the needs of different groups: for example, while early career leaders might benefit from content and training on specific aspects of management and leadership, more experienced leaders arguably require structured but open-ended opportunities to reflect on

their existing experience and to collaborate with peers on developmental projects.

While this evidence on school leadership development approaches is helpful, it is far from 'gold standard' and there are very few studies that rigorously evaluate the impact of leadership programmes in education. Two evaluations that have been undertaken are both from the US, so may not be representative of the wider picture, but nevertheless signal that leadership programmes and interventions are by no means universally effective in improving pupil outcomes. Grissom, Mitani and Blissett (2017) found that while applicants with higher scores in the School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA) in Tennessee were more likely to secure a principalship, SLLA score did not predict potential measures of principal job performance in post. Corcoran's (2017) evaluation of the National Institute for School Leadership's Executive Development Program for serving principals in one US state found that the control group of students achieved higher than those in the schools where the principal had attended the programme.

In addition to debates about the design of leadership programmes, there are also ongoing discussions around the most appropriate content and knowledge areas that programmes for school leaders should address. For example, Hallinger and Lu (2013) argue that school leadership programmes could usefully include areas covered in most non-educational leadership programmes, such as project management, data-based decision-making, customer orientation, and strategic management and strategic planning. They also argue for a much stronger international focus to be embedded within educational leadership and management programmes, but acknowledge that such perspectives are contentious, since they imply a level of homogenisation in approaches to leadership and leadership development.

Other observers argue that different national systems should retain a distinct approach to identifying and developing leaders, which are 'rooted in specific national conditions and contexts' (Bolam, 2004: 251). Bush (2012) reviews leadership development approaches in eight different systems and concludes that national conditions and cultures do shape the approach. However, in their study of leadership development approaches across seven different school systems, Harris and Jones (2015: 172–3) observe the degree to which these systems are engaged in policy borrowing and a convergent approach to headship qualifications, arguing that five of the seven systems:

seem to be gravitating towards the same approach to leadership development and training. All have introduced national standards, and subsequently national qualifi-cations for principals, and all have national agencies to oversee these standards and qualifications. All have either borrowed or are considering borrowing, in part or in entirety, the same leadership qualification and model of leadership development.

So it seems that there is a trend towards greater alignment, or isomor-phism, in approaches to leadership development around the world. However, any such alignment appears premature, given that research and thinking on how to develop leaders in education is still emerging, with a relatively weak evidence base to support particular approaches, and with significant debates around whether and how such development is suffi-ciently contextualised and adapted for different national contexts. When combined with the adaptive challenges facing policy and practice outlined in the previous sections, this presents an important set of challenges for those charged with establishing and leading national colleges; these are explored in the following section in relation to the three colleges.

The development and governance of the three national colleges

This section provides a high-level summary of each of the three national colleges, describing their evolution, remit, funding model and governance structure. Before doing so, it briefly positions the examples in relation to what is known from existing (albeit limited) literature about how school systems structure these activities.

How do different school systems structure their oversight of leadership development at national level?

It is important to be clear that while there are other examples of national colleges that could have been included in this review, for example in Austria, Israel and Slovenia, the decision to create an independent national college or agency remains the exception rather than the rule, with most systems keeping this responsibility within the ministry of education. Pont et al. (2008: 126–7) describe the range of different arrangements in place across the systems that they studied:

> Across OECD countries, provision of preparation, induction and development programmes is managed at different levels of government and by a variety of

organisations. Some countries and regions … determine the need for training at state level and establish state-level programmes for its provision. England and Slovenia fund non-departmental public bodies … Ireland and Northern Ireland have departmental bodies … Austria funds independent universities to develop and deliver mandated programmes … In Finland, there are several in-service training providers … Provincial and municipal levels are free to determine leadership training policy in some countries.

Even where there is a single national body, that agency will usually then commission or work in partnership with other charities, professional associations, universities and/or private providers on the design and delivery of programmes and qualifications (Pont et al., 2008).

These observations help to position the national colleges studied within the wider international picture: in essence we see that they are unusual, but not unique, and that even where such distinct colleges do not exist, the same functions are often addressed in a similar way by a similar range of providers.

Context and history in the three systems

This section sets the context for the analysis of the CEO interviews and subsequent discussion by outlining the evolution of the colleges and highlighting the wider contextual features for each one. Considerably more has been written about the National Institute of Education (NIE) and National College for School Leadership (NCSL), presumably because they have been in existence for longer and have had a stronger engagement with the research community, so these two institutions are covered in greater depth.

National Institute of Education, Singapore

Singapore's educational journey and success in international rankings such as PISA and TIMSS has been studied extensively, sometimes by external observers (Barber et al., 2007; Jensen et al., 2012) and sometimes by Singaporean and Singapore-based researchers (Ng, 2010, 2017; Dimmock and Tan, 2013; Tan, Low and Hung, 2017; Lee et al., 2014; *Toh* et al., 2016; Koh and Hung, 2018). It is not the intention to reiterate or discuss the broader findings from those studies in any detail here, but headline considerations include: Singapore's small size (356 schools in total), its tight central bureaucratic control exercised by a single political party and its pragmatic focus on efficiency and effectiveness in the context of a need for

rapid nation-building and economic development through human capital. Since the late 1990s, policy in Singapore has recognised a need to move towards a less top-down approach and to encourage greater creativity and student-centred pedagogies, encapsulated in the Thinking Skills Learning Nation and Teach Less Learn More agendas. Today the approach is often characterised in terms of 'centralised-decentralisation', involving a combination of tight central prescription over aspects such as the curriculum and the outcomes required, together with a looser level of control over how schools operate to achieve these outcomes. That said, schools are by no means left to their own devices: for example, they are expected to participate in local networks, each of which has a superintendent, as outlined below.

In their analysis of the factors that underpin the Singaporean approach to school leadership, Dimmock and Tan (2013: 324) argue that 'politically and economically, context and culture define the nature of leadership itself – possibly more so than in more liberal democratic regimes'. They analyse the tightly coupled set of Ministry of Education (MOE) human resource policies and practices which shape who becomes a leader and how they operate. They conclude that seven approaches work in concert to achieve 'an extraordinary level of coherence and alignment – in leadership and system-wide policy innovation – to which most other systems can only aspire' (2013: 334). The seven approaches are: the creation of a leadership track as one of three career paths; an appraisal system that consistently rewards leaders conforming to specified criteria; a consensus view of the currently estimated potential of leaders at all levels; leadership preparation and development principally provided by a monopolist institution (i.e. the NIE); the rotation of senior school leaders, especially principals, between schools; the cluster structure and superintendent role that recognises and promotes those with leadership talent; and last, MOE robustness in exhorting and explicating the values underlying its policies and leadership per se.

Dimmock and Tan's analysis situates the NIE's work within a wider leadership ecosystem in Singapore. The NIE was formed in 1991 as an autonomous institution with the Nanyang Technological University, building on earlier incarnations as a Teacher Training College and Institute of Education. Today the NIE is unique among the colleges studied here, both because it is a research intensive university institution and because it is a monopoly provider for initial teacher education and leadership development within Singapore. The NIE is responsible for the key milestone

programmes that teachers complete on their route to principalship: the Management and Leadership in Schools (MLS) programme for heads of department, and the Leadership Situation Exercise (LSE) and Leaders in Education Programme (LEP) for aspiring principals. Launched in 2001, the LEP is a 6-month full-time fully paid-for programme attended by selected vice-principals and ministry officials to prepare them for school leadership. The programme is undoubtedly the most extensive of the programmes offered by the three colleges: its content covers systems and futures thinking, organisational learning and dealing with complexity as well as more operational aspects of leadership. It also includes a two-week visit to another country and a Creative Action Project (CAP), where participants propose and implement a 'value-adding change' in a different school to their own.

Jensen et al.'s (2017) review of leadership development models and practices in high-performing systems uses the NIE LEP programme as an illustration of the way in which some systems are looking beyond rigid competency-based approaches and instead using extended in-school projects and action research as a way to develop challenging, dynamic and open-ended learning experiences which can develop genuine systemic thinkers for schools. Certainly, the various Singaporean policy makers interviewed by Ho and Koh (2018) and the writings of senior NIE academics who have had responsibility for the leadership programmes (Ng, 2017) make clear that there has been a relentless focus on preparing leaders to think and act systemically and with a focus on the future in the LEP.

Other observers are less confident that the NIE's model is sufficiently open to divergent perspectives to really prepare school leaders for a more complex and challenging future. For example, Dimmock and Tan observe that the NIE's programmes align with the MOE's Leader Growth Model (LGM) and Philosophy for Educational Leadership, which set out the values, purpose and priorities for school leaders. They argue that 'it is evident that some, perhaps many, school leaders gradually begin to integrate their own personal and professional identities with the MOE's values, thereby internalizing the latter as their own, adopting them as a kind of "default" position for undergirding their leadership practice' (Dimmock and Tan, 2012: 331), and while they see benefits from this in terms of alignment, they also argue that the leadership cadre reflects 'high degrees of homogeneity and conformism' (Dimmock and Tan, 2012: 336).

Turning to the structure of the NIE, it is governed by an executive council which is chaired by the permanent secretary of the MOE. While

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Dimmock and Tan argue that 'the close links between the MOE and NIE ensure strategic alignment' (2013: 329), Professor Pak Tee Ng from the NIE explains that any such alignment only comes through a dialogic and sometimes messy process that is held together by a shared common purpose and a culture of pragmatism:

> The officials from MOE, teachers from schools and teacher educators from NIE are constantly interacting through official and invisible networks about educational policies, school practices and teacher development. Such discussions are not always harmonious … [but] change emerges through a process of advocacy, nudging, and mutual understanding, by parties united by a common purpose of education and nation-building. (Ng, 2017: 180)

National College for School Leadership, England

England's NCSL was launched by the Labour government in 2000, with a remit focused on providing 'a single, national focus for school leadership development and research', by working as 'a provider and promoter of excellence' and a 'catalyst for innovation' and 'debate' (Southworth, 2004: 340). There are important differences in scale between the NIE and NCSL, with the latter college serving around 24,000 schools and up to 250,000 leaders. As a result, Bolam (2004: 260) argues that 'the college's overall conception, scale and execution represent "a paradigm shift" (Hallinger, 2003) in comparison with predecessor models both internationally and in England and Wales'.

NCSL built on foundations that had been laid over the two decades prior to its launch. These included a government-funded but university-based National Development Centre (NDC) for school management training during the 1980s and a School Management Task Force (SMTF), based at the Department of Education and Science (DES) from 1989 until 1992. From 1994 onwards the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), a non-departmental public body (NDPB), was given responsibility for developing a national approach to pre-service, induction and in-service training for headteachers. This included the design and launch of the first National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH), with the first cohort starting in 1997. Once NCSL was established it took over responsibility for NPQH and the other programmes for new and serving headteachers from the TTA.

As outlined below, NCSL has had responsibility for far more than just professional development and accreditation for aspiring head teachers, but

NPQH has nevertheless remained a core focus for its work and remit. NPQH is both a leadership development programme, with a curriculum and set of requirements as well as a formal qualification. The qualification is awarded based on a formal assessment against a set of competencies which broadly relate to – but are not explicitly based on – England's National Standards of Excellence for Headteachers, published in 2015. Between 2009 and 2012 the qualification was made mandatory for all first-time heads. The Conservative governments in power since 2010 have continued to support NPQH, but have made the qualification optional again (in 2012) and have reduced the funding available, meaning that schools or individuals must cover the costs. Despite these changes it appears that most school governing bodies do expect applicants for headship positions to hold the qualification and 61 per cent of all headteachers in England held it in 2013 (Stevenson, 2013).

NPQH has been redesigned several times since it was launched, reflecting changes in both policy and the wider evidence base on school leadership. The most significant changes came in 2008, when the assessment bar for entry was raised in order to focus only on applicants who could demonstrate that they were within 12–18 months of headship. A new requirement to undertake a placement project in another, high-performing school was also introduced at that time. In 2012, the curriculum was redesigned to become modular, with delivery moved from nationally commissioned providers to a licensed model. This licensed model allows approved local and regional partnerships, usually led by high-performing schools, but also involving charities, businesses and universities, to contextualise and offer the programme, competing with each other to attract participants. There is a strong emphasis on practical training in the licensing model, for example, 50 per cent of the facilitation must be undertaken by serving school leaders (Supovitz, 2014).

NCSL's former deputy CEO, Professor Geoff Southworth highlights that the college was 'a leadership and not just a headship college' (2004: 341). In its early years the college developed a leadership development framework and launched national programmes across five levels – from 'emergent leaders' (i.e. teachers who are beginning to take on management and leadership responsibilities) to 'consultant leaders' (i.e. experienced headteachers and other school leaders who are ready to develop further their training, mentoring and coaching skills). According to Supovitz (2014: 27), this commitment to distributed leadership in the college's early work played a significant role in changing the ways in which leadership is

structured and enacted in English schools: 'across a span of 15 years, leadership development in England went from a primary focus on a single leader (the headteacher) to an emphasis on a nested team of leaders, each with individual roles and responsibilities, but all working in concert toward sustained school improvement'.

Importantly, the college was not only a provider of large-scale leadership development programmes and qualifications for individuals, it also played a wider role in school and system improvement. There were many examples of these initiatives, but the four most significant were arguably: the Networked Learning Communities programme (Jackson and Temperley, 2006); the succession planning programme (Bush, 2011); the London and City Challenge programmes (Rudd et al., 2011); and the work to designate and deploy high-performing 'system leaders' as National Leaders of Education and (after 2010) Teaching Schools to support the wider system (Matthews and Berwick, 2013).

In addition, the college offered extensive online resources and discussion fora as well as regional networks and a regular magazine for schools. The college also had a dedicated research team that was responsible for commissioning and synthesising research into aspects of leadership and leadership development and for supporting practitioner research (Southworth, 2004; Mulford, 2004).

As can be seen from this brief summary of its work, NCSL's scale and level of engagement across different aspects of England's school system was considerable. For example, by 2016 it was reported to have delivered 230,000 programme places and to have been drawn on by 96 per cent of all secondary schools and 79 per cent of all primary schools in England (Pearson, 2016).

In practice, of course, NCSL's development as a new delivery agency and its relationship with both government and the profession was complex and sometimes challenging. Mulford (2004) describes the early days of NCSL based on his visit there in 2001, when a small group of staff were attempting to establish it in both conceptual and practical terms whilst also dealing with multiple, competing demands from different stakeholders. The college was sometimes criticised: for example, Mulford quotes an article by David Hart (Mulford, 2004: 315), the general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, who accused it of 'attempting to "rule the leadership world", and [of being] very prescriptive about how senior staff should improve their skills'. By the time of Mulford's second visit, in 2003, he notes a positive shift, with a team of permanent staff in

place and with evidence of stronger engagement from school leaders and key stakeholders in a coherent programme of activities.

Over those first four years it seems that the new college's leadership team landed on an approach that sought to find a delicate balance between coherence, contextualisation and flexibility. For example, NCSL's chief executive argued in 2002 that 'The college is not about prescriptions or blueprints. It is not about telling school leaders how to do their job. It is about opening up possibilities and giving people the chance to work together' (quoted in Mulford, 2004: 319).

However, this balance was not an easy one to keep and the college continued to face challenges as it sought to establish itself in the eyes of government as well as the professional and academic communities. The Labour government had invested heavily in education since 1997 and had seen some initial improvements in literacy and numeracy outcomes at primary level, but by the early 2000s these improvements had plateaued and policy makers were arguably looking to move beyond a model of top-down pressure and prescription, but were not yet clear on the new approach and so were promoting multiple parallel initiatives and innovations. One result was that the national education landscape was highly 'congested' at that time (Skelcher, 2000), with multiple initiatives and multiple government-funded agencies ('quangos'), including the TTA, National Strategies, British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) and General Teaching Council (GTC), as well as independent charities (such as the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust), all operating in overlapping spaces and competing for funds and influence.

This complex policy landscape made the college's job of establishing itself as a new agency all the more challenging. A key question was how it should be constituted and governed. Serious consideration was given to embedding it within a university – as with the NIE in Singapore – but, in the end, following a tender process its new purpose-built centre was located at the University of Nottingham, but structured as a non-departmental government body (NDPB). This meant that it was funded and directed by government, but was not 'of' government, in that it had its own governing council and its staff were not civil servants. An internal Department for Education and Skills memo from 1999 sets out ministers' thinking on this at the time:

> In terms of formal constitution, the preferred option which Ministers are moving towards is to set the College up as a limited company. They want the College to be at some distance from the Department, so it cannot be set up as an Executive

Agency. However, since the College needs to be rooted in Government, giving it authority and a sense of being written into the national landscape, Ministers are clear that they want to appoint the Director and all future Directors, and the Governing Council … in formal classification terms the College will be an Executive NDPB. (Memo May 6, 1999) (quoted in Gunter and Forrester, 2009: 361)

There were several arguments for establishing the college 'at some distance from the Department', including a desire to free up civil servants from day-to-day implementation so that they could focus on strategy and a view that an independent agency would be seen as more credible than civil servants in the eyes of the profession. Critics argued that any supposed independence from government was 'clearly more imagined that real' (Thrupp, 2005: 17) and there is little doubt that ministers and officials exercised direct control over the college, through their ability to make key appointments, through the annual remit letter and regular performance stock takes and, when concerns were more acute, an end-to-end review, which led the founding CEO to leave and a fundamental change in approach (Revell, 2004; Gunter and Forrester, 2009).

While this level of political control can be critiqued and certainly challenges any idealised notion of school autonomy equating with 'freedom', it can also be seen as legitimate for a publicly funded education system. Equally, as the memo notes, political sponsorship gave the college 'authority', or its own legitimacy in the eyes of the profession. Of course, political sponsorship is always subject to change: as Bolam (2004: 263) observed, 'the ongoing commitment and support of key civil servants, as well as senior politicians, is essential to the continuing success and existence of such national initiatives'. That support became considerably more precarious when the Conservative-led coalition came to power in 2010 after thirteen years of Labour rule. The Conservatives had campaigned on a promise to ignite a 'bonfire of the quangos' across government, arguing that Labour's approach lacked democratic oversight and had stifled the creativity of front-line professionals. Several quangos were closed within months of the election, while the others, including the college, became executive agencies and were merged with the department in 2012. This meant that the college's governing council was disbanded and the staff became civil servants, giving ministers direct control over day-to-day operations. Then, in 2013, the college was merged with the TTA (by then called the Training and Development Agency) to become the National College for Teaching and Leadership. Finally, in 2017, it was announced

that the college would close altogether, with its centre in Nottingham vacated and the vast majority of its functions subsumed within the core department (Whittaker, 2015, 2017).

Scottish College for Educational Leadership, Scotland

Scotland's education system includes around 2,400 schools and is distinct from the other three UK nations, for example with its own curriculum and qualifications framework. The Scottish Parliament and government oversee education policy, while the thirty-two local education authorities own and run the state-funded schools in their area. Education Scotland, a national executive agency, inspects state-funded schools and also operates key improvement initiatives, such as the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) and the establishment of a new model of Broad General Education (BGE) up to age 15 has shaped the policy agenda since 2002, although these developments are only now being fully realised in schools. According to the OECD, CfE 'has sought to develop a coherent 3–18 curriculum around capacities and learning, rather than school subjects' (OECD, 2015: 37) through a highly consensual approach to policy development and implementation. More recently, in 2015, the Scottish Government launched the Scottish Attainment Challenge, which has a particular focus on closing poverty-related attainment gaps. The attainment challenge focuses targeted improvement activity in literacy, numeracy and health and well-being in nine 'challenge authorities'.
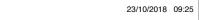
The Donaldson report – *Teaching Scotland's Future* (2011) – established the framework for professional and leadership development in Scotland, including through its recommendation to establish a Virtual College for School Leadership. The report recognised that leadership development needed to be more coherent, with clearer pathways for teachers, and that leadership development for serving headteachers was patchy. For example, it reported that 'Almost all of Scotland's local authorities offer leadership programmes for teachers … [but] very few LAs offer leadership development programmes which provide a clear pathway to senior management posts in schools' (Donaldson, 2011: 79).

Prior to the establishment of the Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL), the Scottish Qualification for Headship (SQH) had been available since 1998, provided by local authorities and universities in partnership and accredited against the national standards for headship by

the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). A small-scale evaluation of SQH by Menter et al. (2003) reported 'extremely positive' outcomes, however Donaldson reported that some LAs had withdrawn from the scheme and that numbers on the programme had declined in recent years, apparently because it was seen as too academic and lacking in practical focus.

Following the publication of the Donaldson report, a scoping group was established by the Scottish Government to inform the development of the new college. SCEL was then formally launched in 2014 as a Company Limited by Guarantee, wholly owned by the Scottish Government and with funding committed for three years. SCEL worked rapidly to design and launch a new headship preparation programme in 2015 – *Into Headship* – which is run in partnership with seven universities as a 60-credit masters-level qualification. From 2020 *Into Headship* will become mandatory for all new headteachers. The LAs recruit to the programme and it is accredited against the National Standards by GTCS. SCEL has since launched *In Headship*, a programme for newly appointed headteachers, which is offered by four universities. SCEL has also developed a range of other programmes, for example for teacher leaders, middle leaders and more experienced heads, as well as an online resource-bank (*The Framework for Educational Leadership*) and a list of approved programmes run by external organisations. SCEL also runs conferences and commissions research into aspects of school leadership.

In the summer of 2017 the Scottish Government published a system governance review (2017) which included a proposal to integrate SCEL into Education Scotland. The review made clear that SCEL's work needed to continue, but argued that the educational landscape was too crowded and required simplification. SCEL became part of Education Scotland in April 2018, at which point it ceased to exist as a stand-alone company and became part of the larger executive agency. The governance review also announced plans to legislate to create a Head Teachers Charter, which would significantly increase the responsibilities and accountabilities of headteachers. Initial consultation responses raised significant concerns about this proposal from headteacher groups, for example due to concerns around workload and bureaucracy.

Leading a national college − the challenge of facing both ways

This section summarises key themes that emerged from the interviews with the three CEOs/directors, setting these in the context of the challenges and issues highlighted so far. It is structured in two sections. The first focuses on the governance and leadership of the colleges, highlighting the ways in which the CEOs interpret their mission and relationships with policy and practice. The second focuses on approaches to delivering national leadership development programmes at scale.

Facing both ways: governance, leadership and authenticity

All three CEOs could articulate a clear mission for their organisation, but there were subtle differences in how they articulated these which seemed to reflect differences in their respective policy and operating environments as well as differences in culture and personal style.

The NIE appeared the most focused of the three colleges, held on track by a tight and coherent policy and governance framework and facilitated by its monopoly position in the system. The director of NIE described two key objectives: 'we do our best to ensure that the teaching profession is held in the highest regard and that there are enough people to run our schools, but we also have a second mission, which is research and how to advance our knowledge'.

By contrast, the CEOs of NCSL and SCEL both struggled to some extent with mission drift, or at least mission expansion. For example, the CEO of NCSL explained that 'when I arrived at the College we were doing all sorts of things ... so people didn't understand what the College was for'. Similarly, the CEO of SCEL explained that the college was set up to enhance 'coherence in the system', but that this had proved hard to achieve in practice: 'I remember saying at the beginning, don't expect us to deliver lots quickly, what's important is that we start small and we get it right. But actually, looking back ... I'm not sure I can say we did that.'

Clearly, there are different possible interpretations for why the two UK colleges differed from the NIE in this respect. One explanation relates to system size: in a small city state like Singapore the range of needs are less broad and decisions can be made consensually, although the CEO of SCEL explained that Scotland is also small enough 'to get all of the national organisations in one room'. A second factor is the NIE's relative longevity and monopoly status, meaning that it faces limited competition from other

system players. Giving NIE a monopoly was described as a conscious decision by policy makers: 'I think the government saw the wisdom that trying to create competition for its own sake, didn't make sense, particularly in a small system like Singapore'.

A third factor appeared to be the level of political and ideological stability in Singapore, with no changes in government there is less need to change direction, especially when coupled with a strong culture of efficiency and pragmatism. All three of these arguments – that Singapore's small size, stability and lack of competition allow for high levels of consensus on the best approach – are supported to some extent by this quote from the NIE director:

> We believe in a university based teacher education model. I don't think we subscribe too much to the idea of practitioner based accreditation, not that we have anything against Teach First or Teach for America … Because the ministry, the profession, the public, and the NIE, all subscribe to the idea of a university based education, which is quite like the medical model … you get the best of all talent, the best of the theory and the best of the practice, that's how we like to see it.

Perhaps as a result of this settled position, the director of NIE could be pragmatic in focusing on the MOE as their key client: 'The way I look at it is this: my mission is for MOE, that is the primary mission. If that is done, then other things would be good to have, a good ranking or whatever. I think if you look at it this way you are more centred in your stewardship.'

By contrast, the CEO of NCSL felt that their greatest challenge was how to balance the needs of the government with the needs of the profession – the challenge of 'facing both ways' at once:

> How do you get the balance right between either having government as your key client, or being part of government, on the one hand, and being for the profession and it being 'their' college, 'their' academy on the other? That is one of the most important things to get right. Because if you're just seen as the mouthpiece of government, top down, not for them, you will be tolerated, but people won't enthusiastically engage with you. And if you're just seen as being part of the profession, government will say 'why should we keep on funding you?' And how you balance that is absolutely a key role for the CEO.

These differences in emphasis were reflected in the approach to governance. All three colleges had a board which was responsible for setting strategy and monitoring performance, working within the parameters of

the wider policy and funding environment. Reporting to a board was a new experience for all three CEOs when they started in role, and so had required new learning and ways of working, but all three highlighted the value of this model, in particular because it brought in expertise from beyond education and because it sharpened the quality of decision-making.

For the NIE director, the board, which was chaired by the permanent secretary of the MOE, provides a forum to achieve coherence and avoid mission drift:

> One reason our policies work in Singapore, is that there is really a deliberate plan to ensure that really the best minds are involved in governance. They are some of the most difficult people to work with, because their demands are really sharp … In four years as Director I have learned tremendously … One secret of success in Singapore lies in this tremendous coherence, ensuring there is no mission drift and really ensuring that things work.

This strong governance model meant that the NIE was 'subject to tremendous scrutiny'. Such scrutiny did not mean that decision-making was always easy, indeed the director saw balancing the different demands of stakeholders as one of their greatest challenges: 'The problem is not with doing a or b, the problem is how to prioritise.' But there was a sense that any differences of opinion would be worked through behind closed doors before a unified approach was agreed.

This is not to suggest that the CEOs of NCSL and SCEL did not see their boards as providing good governance, they did: but there was a sense that this was not enough to achieve the coherence seen in Singapore. Part of the issue was that policy priorities and challenges were constantly evolving in England and Scotland, and that for the CEO in England in particular there was also a level of competition with other organisations in a crowded landscape. As a result, the CEO had to work hard – with their chair – to secure the status and resources required for the organisation to fulfil its role as a national college, as this quote indicates:

> As CEO I was focussing on the politics … I was really concerned to make sure that when new things happened at policy level that were about leadership, the College was the organisation that ministers came to. And of course when I first came there that wasn't the case. In fact it was the opposite, they went to [other organisations] or to the private sector, so trying to get them to do that was really really hard at first.

Achieving this status in the eyes of ministers required, above all, a strong focus on delivery – 'you have to deliver, if you don't deliver the meetings (with ministers) will stop'. Beyond this, it required that leading head-teachers were supportive of the English and Scottish colleges and did not undermine them in the eyes of ministers, as the CEO of NCSL explained:

> I made it my business to look at who the most influential heads were in the system and to spend time with them, even if they hated us … I wanted to find any way to ensure that at the least they were not talking against us.

This need to engage the profession may explain why the CEOs in England and Scotland both saw a level of independence from government as impor-tant, since this allowed them to build the trust and confidence of more sceptical school leaders. For example, the CEO of SCEL explained that when it was established: 'the strong view was that SCEL needed to be independent, it needed to be an advocate for leaders in Scotland. It needed to be seen by teachers, by the profession, as an independent entity.' One benefit of this independence was that it allowed the colleges to move quickly: for example, the CEO of SCEL argued that teachers 'saw us as like a start-up, like a tech start up, the way we engaged in social media, that we ran prototypes and so on … it doesn't look like a traditional government agency'. This is not to say that the CEOs did not engage actively with policy, indeed they were engaged in constant, productive dialogue with policy makers, drawing on their organisational research and experience of front-line issues to shape a range of agendas and to agree their own organi-sational priorities. One anticipated benefit of SCEL joining Education Scotland was that it would allow for greater coherence and impact by inte-grating its work with other areas of policy and delivery. However, at the same time, there was a concern that its independent style and engagement with the profession might be lost as a result of becoming part of the formal government bureaucracy following the Governance Review.

So it seems that the NIE director felt able to prioritise the MOE as the main client, working with officials to achieve consensus and then focus on delivery – 'you tell us the needs and we decide how to meet them'. By contrast, the CEOs in England and Scotland faced a more complex and turbulent policy environment which meant that they had to prioritise engaging the profession at the same time as policy makers, forcing them to 'face both ways' at once. Achieving this balance whilst retaining authen-ticity was challenging, as the CEO of NCSL acknowledged:

> You've got to be able to operate in that political space, and having the confidence of ministers and officials, and being able to operate in the professional space and

have the confidence of key leaders. And how you do that in an authentic way is absolutely critical.

While there were no simple strategies for working in these complex environments, a number of common themes did appear significant. These included the CEO's career background, where all three were former school leaders, which gave them a level of credibility with the profession, but they had also worked in wider contexts, whether a university, local government or national policy, giving them an ability to work at national policy level. Secondly, they all acknowledged the importance of appointing a strong team, as one CEO put it: 'the team is crucial … you have to have a team that is together and that has a good balance of skills … people who understand about leadership, people who understand about licensing or commissioning, people who understand the back office, and people who understand about research'. Finally, they each had high levels of self-awareness about their own approach to leadership: one described this in terms of an 'invitational' style ('I asked for advice all the time. I didn't pretend I knew how to do it'); another argued that the key was 'people, people, people' coupled with a strong future orientation; while the third argued that 'values-based leadership is important, the moral purpose of leadership'.

Ultimately, as we have seen, the volatile policy landscape in both England and Scotland meant that both organisations faced mergers and, in NCSL's case, closure. The CEO of NCSL was sanguine about this, seeing it as inevitable in a democracy that different governments would have different preferences:

> Political priorities change, different governments change. I think we were a victim of being a New Labour venture, which meant there was suspicion … We staved it off, we did a lot of good work to not be closed down in 2010 … but we were never trusted, as 'theirs', we were seen as necessary for a while, but then money, austerity and wanting to be run by someone who was one of their own, was part of it … it was political.

National leadership development: models of delivery

The CEOs were all able to provide clear definitions of leadership and why it matters, but they acknowledged that it could be difficult to define and enact frameworks for leadership development and delivery, both because such frameworks risked 'putting people in boxes' and because of the sheer

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practical challenges associated with delivering high-quality provision for different groups at national scale.

The NIE had managed to largely keep its focus on its cornerstone leadership programmes – Management and Leadership in Schools (MLS) and the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP) – although its researchers were also involved in a range of network and technology-based innovation projects and it offered several hundred other non-accredited professional development programmes for teachers and middle leaders each year. When asked whether school leadership in Asia is distinctive from leadership in the West, the NIE director argued not: 'it's all the same, above culture, good leaders are very visionary, highly adaptive'.

Linked to the issues explored in the last section, both UK CEOs wrestled with how far they could genuinely help build school leadership agency in the context of a 'cluttered policy landscape'. As one of them put it:

> Our passion is about building teacher agency, about building the confidence of head teachers. At the end of the day, the policy directives are … not about dictats … 'this is how it must be done' … I think the policy framework genuinely enables head teachers not to be implementers. I think that's what we want … I don't think you develop a profession to implement, you develop a profession to be able to teach, to lead, to empower others, but I don't think we're there yet.

One aspect here was the relationship with universities and with theory and research. The quote from the NIE director in the previous section made clear that Singapore is committed to a university-based education for teachers and leaders, and the NIE's status as a research-intensive university faculty made that possible. However, this commitment was tempered with a strong dose of pragmatism: for example, the director explained that there was little appetite for critical research into areas such as social justice in Singapore, so the focus was far more on aspects of pedagogy and practice. SCEL's programmes were developed and delivered in partnership with universities and the CEO argued that 'if we are saying that teaching is a complex role and that university learning and academic engagement is an important part of that, then the same is true for headship. It means that heads are critical engaged with policy and can analyse research and so on.' By contrast, NCSL's programmes did not rely on the universities, and although the CEO argued that 'research is really important' the focus was very much on applied research, 'it was real, it wasn't a book that some academic had written'. In the CEO's view

> if the university is going to do this then you need to make sure its hand is on the practical rather than just theoretical and academic – and that's not just about the content but also about the quality of the facilitation … I think if you're going to

run a good leadership programme the people who are leading it are as important as the content.

Both UK CEOs were committed to distributed leadership models and both colleges had a strong focus on teacher leadership and middle leadership development. The challenge was that in moving beyond provision for headteachers, there was a need to achieve coherence without becoming overly structured and without stretching their capacity too thinly: 'on the one hand you wanted a notion of progression, but on the other hand you wanted to avoid it becoming a trap – and you can't do this until you've done that'.

The final delivery challenge was twofold: how to deliver at scale and how to ensure that development was embedded into the day-to-day life and work of schools. SCEL's model was to work in partnership with the universities and LAs and to use online learning effectively.

NCSL also used online learning extensively, but its overall journey involved three phases over its seventeen-year history, according to the CEO. The first involved the core team leading the design of programmes and then working in partnership with regional partners and offices to deliver this at scale. The problem was that this was too narrow and dependent on a small group of people, rather than tapping into wider expertise, but it had the benefit of building a strong core of expertise within the college staff. The second stage involved commissioning aspects of design and all of the delivery, drawing on sophisticated procurement skills to work with a range of delivery partners. This model had strengths, particularly because it allowed the college to define quality and monitor consistency rather than focusing on its own delivery. However, the model was also complex, expensive and cumbersome, because once a contract had been let it could not easily be changed, and it failed to really integrate with the capacity and work of schools themselves. So the third stage involved designing the modular curriculum and qualifications framework and then licensing it to schools and other providers, with the college focused on quality assurance (QA). In the CEO's view this model wouldn't have been possible at the outset, because schools wouldn't have had the knowledge or expertise required to run the programmes.

Supovitz, an American academic, reviewed the English system's approach to leadership development in 2014, three years before the college finally closed. He characterised the licensing approach as a lattice of leadership, combining a clear vertical framework with strong lateral,

network-based delivery by groups of schools. He saw this as reflecting a blend of Labour's hierarchical commitment to building leadership capacity with the Conservatives' more market-based approach, arguing that: 'It is the integration of these two approaches, rather than the layering of one over the other, that holds much promise' (2014: 31). Supovitz concluded (2014: 31) that 'England's challenge moving forward is to resist abandoning one strand for the other, and evolve toward integrating the best of both approaches, while similarly compensating for their limitations. Each approach is strengthened by the presence of the other.' In the event this did not happen. Reflecting four years later, after the closure of the college, NCSL's CEO argued that

> we got it badly wrong in the end, because we let go too much, the licensing model became a free for all, the centre bit, the QA, disappeared … If you just say 'off you go' … then it becomes what we've got now, which is some really good stuff and some really bad stuff, all carrying the same brand.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed the rationale for and development of three national leadership colleges and has explored the ways in which CEOs of those colleges interpret and respond to the challenges that they face. As we have seen, although they are established as independent institutions with apparently simple missions, the colleges all exist within complex and changing landscapes and so must work in sophisticated ways to influence and position themselves in order to secure sustained resources and to achieve impact. Each of these national landscapes differs from the others in important ways, but it is also possible to see commonalities between the two UK systems and the ways in which these differ from the Singaporean example. The UK systems, but particularly England, are more cluttered and volatile, requiring the CEOs to be more focused on strategic engagement with different stakeholders. This can make it difficult for the UK colleges to retain focus and avoid mission creep. However, the dynamism and scale of the UK systems also drives creativity, with important lessons for the design of vertical and lateral models of leadership development. By contrast, Dimmock and Tan (2013) show how the NIE's work is woven in to a carefully designed set of approaches for managing the supply and quality of school leaders in Singapore. Coupled with the NIE's political stability, tight governance, monopoly status and relative longevity, this has allowed for a coherent but still future-focused approach over time.

At the heart of debates about these national colleges is the question of what they are for and how their work should be interpreted in the context of education systems where school leadership roles are becoming more pressurised and more complex. The evidence from the CEO interviews could potentially be used to support both sides of the same debate. On the one hand, they are clearly working to implement, or at least actively progress, hierarchical policies, through the ways in which they define and influence the work of front-line leaders. Despite the argument from one CEO that 'the policy framework genuinely enables headteachers not to be implementers', they also acknowledged that 'I don't think we're there yet'. While working within or with universities to offer Masters' level development was seen as a way to equip leaders to critically interrogate policy, this was not necessarily seen as a fail–safe way to avoid hierarchical control. At the same time, all three colleges could be seen as far more than simple instruments of hierarchical control. For example, they were all seeking to align policy and practice and to build capacity for productive change, including by providing feedback loops through which leaders could inform policy and by helping to generate a sense of trust and agency among front-line leaders.

This article is significant in helping to address a gap in our understanding of how national leadership colleges are governed and led. It has also sought to enrich our theoretical assessment of these developments by comparing and combining critical sociological and complexity-informed perspectives. Inevitably, there are limitations to the approach adopted here, not least since it was based on a limited set of interviews. A wider survey of school–level leaders in each system would help to enrich the analysis, as would a more longitudinal approach, allowing an assessment of change over time.

Notes

1   The author worked for the National College for School Leadership (later the National College for Teaching and Leadership) in England from 2006 until 2013.

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