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Lancaster University Management School
Working Paper
2005/037

Leader-led relations in context

Margaret Collinson and David Collinson

Lancaster Leadership Centre
Lancaster University Management School
Lancaster LA1 4YX
UK

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Centre for Excellence in Leadership

Lancaster Leadership Centre, Lancaster University Management School
Lancaster, LA1 4YX. Telephone No. (01514) 510749



‘Leader-Led Relations in Context’

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The Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) is a Leadership College funded by the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) to whom all the results of the research project will be reported.

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Contact Details

Centre for Excellence in Leadership
Lancaster Leadership Centre
Lancaster University Management School
Gillow Avenue
Lancaster
LA1 4YX

Professor David Collinson
Project Co-Director and Researcher
Tel. No. 01524 – 593147
Email: d.collinson@lancaster.ac.uk

Margaret Collinson
Project Co-Director and Researcher
Email: m.collinson@lancaster.ac.uk

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INTRODUCTION

This research project explores 'leader-led relations' in the post-16 education sector. It is informed by, and seeks to contribute to, recent developments in leadership studies. In particular, it goes beyond the narrow 'leader-centric' approach of traditional mainstream studies to draw on more critical perspectives that directly examine the complex dynamics between leaders and led within their specific conditions and consequences. Rather than viewing leadership as the mysterious, charismatic properties of individual 'heroes', this approach treats leadership as a dynamic, interactional, but asymmetrical process between 'leaders' and 'followers', operating within particular shifting local, national and global contexts. This more critical focus on leader-led relations also emphasises the importance of the **context** in which leadership operates. In the search for universal rules and laws of leadership, mainstream leadership researchers have often neglected and/or under-valued the importance of context.

The context of post-16 education is particularly important. Further Education (F.E.) organizations are 'intensely local' (Jones 2005), typically lying at the very heart of the communities they serve. Indeed post-16 education organisations are of crucial strategic significance for local communities. In contemporary UK society, where meritocratic values are widely accepted and supported, the importance of educational achievement and of the accumulation of academic credentials continues to grow. The significance of formal education as a means of acquiring skills, knowledge, a good job and career, a university place and generally 'bettering oneself' has never been greater. Post-16 colleges provide learning opportunities for young people who are frequently at a critical stage of their educational development. Student decisions made at this stage, about which path to take, are likely to impact the rest of their lives.

In addition to providing learning and credentialing opportunities to their students, colleges are important local employers and also typically confer identity, status and credibility on the towns and cities in which they exist and operate. While not all towns have a university located in their environs, most do have FE colleges and 6th Form Centres. Indeed especially in those towns that do not have an associated university, colleges constitute the major educational institution for local young people. FE and 6th Form colleges are enrolling ever-increasing numbers of students. As a result, these institutions are impacting on the lives and families of ever-larger sections of their local communities.

As we elaborate below, the 'embeddedness' of these organisations within local communities raises very significant challenges for post-16 leadership. Despite their local significance, FE organizations do not always receive the recognition they deserve or the full support they need to accomplish their objectives. Given their large number of local stakeholders, it is essential that Colleges and 6th Form Centres are working effectively and that they are supported strongly by local and central Learning Skills Councils (LSCs) and the various government departments that have an interest in UK education.

This first working paper outlines the context for our empirical analysis of leader-led relations. It briefly explains the theoretical assumptions that underpin the research project, highlighting in particular the key issues of power, distance and inequality. It then considers our research methods and highlights some of the primarily positive findings that we have so far uncovered in the sector. The second working paper then outlines some of the recurrent post-16 'leadership challenges', in relation to power, distance and inequality, that have emerged in the research to date.

LEADERSHIP STUDIES

There is now a considerable academic literature on leadership (see e.g. Northouse 2004, Linstead et al 2004). Influenced primarily by U.S. psychological studies, mainstream studies have developed numerous theories of leadership such as 'Trait', 'Styles', 'Contingency', 'Situational', 'Path-Goal', 'Leader-Member Exchange', 'Action-Centred', 'Transactional/Transformational' and 'Charismatic/Neo-Charismatic' leadership. However, the overall approach of most mainstream research is highly 'leader-centric'. Much of this literature over the past fifty years or so has focussed on the 'effectiveness' of specific leaders. Seeking to identify the possible characteristics of inspirational, charismatic leaders, researchers have produced ever-growing lists of 'excellent leadership qualities'.

For decades the key concern of orthodox leadership research has been what makes an effective leader? What are the universal attributes of 'excellent' leaders?

But, persuasive and conclusive answers have proved elusive. Drawing primarily on functionalist theories, using positivist methodologies, much of the research on leadership has tended to produce quantitative and rather superficial findings that have neglected the complex conditions, processes and outcomes of leadership relations and practices. In the

search for law-like generalisations, orthodox studies have sometimes under-valued the importance of the context in which leadership processes occur. Equally, in their preoccupation with leaders, mainstream studies have often under-estimated the importance of followers and their dynamic relationships with leaders.

While academic leadership research has traditionally concentrated on the discourses and practices of leaders, the very same fixation on individual leaders can also be discerned in the popular cultures of many Western societies where the interest in the 'leader as saviour' is currently very influential. This view identifies 'effective leadership' as vital for improving organizational performance, a perspective reflected in the plethora of guides, reports and consultation papers recently published in the U.K. seeking to promote 'excellence' in leadership policy, practice and development. Typically conflating the notion of 'leadership' with 'individual leaders', these popular assumptions frequently take for granted that charismatic leaders as individuals can enhance organizational performance by inspiring subordinates and reinforcing collective goals.

This current widespread interest exemplifies what Meindl et al (1995, 1985) refer to as a 'romanticised' conception of leadership. They argue that we have developed overly heroic and exaggerated views of what leaders do and what they are able to achieve (see also Salancik and Pfeffer 1977). In practice, leaders' contributions to a collective enterprise are likely to be much more constrained. Meindl et al (1985) contend that in the context of causally indeterminate, ambiguous and unpredictable organizational events, the romanticised conception of leadership provides a re-assuring and simplified way of understanding complex organizational processes. For them, an organization's performance is much more closely tied to external factors, such as those affecting whole sectors, as opposed to being under the direct control of its senior management. Suffice it to say here that this tendency to make sense of leadership issues through such individualistic models and assumptions is deeply embedded not only in the research literature, but also in popular cultures, particularly of Western societies.

Research on leadership in the education sector has tended to mirror these dominant assumptions. Here the focus on individual leaders, their skills and competencies, is also currently in vogue. This literature is replete with guidance about 'how to lead' and assumptions that there is a generic set of leadership skills that can be identified and learnt. Educational leaders are being redefined as 'chief executives', 'managing directors' and/or

'presidents' which reflects the way that the sector is increasingly operating as a business, moving from 'welfarism' to 'new managerialism' (Gewitz 2002). However, within the educational literature, there is also an emergent recognition that, while individual 'charismatic leaders' may deliver organizational improvements, this is often very short-term and followed by frustration or despondent dependency (Fullan 2001). In particular, there is a growing realisation in educational research of the need to rethink leadership as much more than something 'accomplished' by a small number of individual leaders.

LEADER-LED RELATIONS

So what does or could a 'post-heroic', less 'leader-centric' conception of post-16 leadership look like? This project holds that a more **critical focus on leader-led relations** has the potential to stimulate a re-examination of key issues around leadership, particularly those that are often taken for granted in mainstream approaches. Clearly, there are many different aspects of the relationships between leaders and followers in the post-16 sector on which our research might focus. For the purposes of these two interconnected working papers, we intend to focus on three particularly important issues that have repeatedly emerged in our research as key factors shaping post-16 leader-led relations: **power**, **distance** and **inequality**. These issues are also of current significance within the critical literature. In this section we briefly consider each of these issues in turn. Whilst in what follows we treat these three issues as largely discrete and separate, our research suggests that in practice they frequently overlap in complex, interwoven and sometimes contradictory ways.

POWER

Our perspective is informed by recent critical and post-structuralist thinking in management and organization studies where issues of power, control and authority in the workplace are particularly prioritised. It is somewhat surprising that so few studies of leadership take these issues seriously given that leaders themselves typically exercise power, authority and control in multiple ways. For example, leaders construct strategic vision, define jobs and shape corporate cultures, make key decisions on hiring, promoting, firing, rewarding and evaluating followers' performance. Bennett (2003) has recently highlighted the importance of power for understanding educational leadership. Arguing that

power is fluid and dynamic, he distinguishes between four kinds of power resource: physical (e.g. physical force), economic (e.g. control over salary), knowledge (e.g. administrative or technical) and normative (access to scarce values, desired ideas or even personal friendships).

Post-structuralist writers like Foucault (1977) have been very influential in recent thinking on the importance of power within organisations. They argue for a new way of thinking that views power as invariably positive, creative and productive. In particular, they focus on the way that power produces knowledge and identity through surveillance and monitoring. One important way in which leaders typically exercise power and authority is through monitoring and motivating followers' performance and by seeking to inspire their commitment and trust. Within the post-16 education sector the U.K. government (particularly through the LSCs) plays a significant role in monitoring performance and setting targets (see Working Paper 2: Leadership Challenges).

Typically, this policy of intensified scrutiny then cascades down and through post-16 organisations. However, research in critical organization studies (within other sectors) suggests that performance assessment can over time generate counter-productive effects, particularly when measurement systems and targets are unrealistic and cut across and contradict one another. **It is, for example, possible that the kind of 'audit cultures' that increasingly characterise the U.K. education sector may reduce employee morale and increase mistrust. Intensified performance assessment may also simply produce employee 'performances'** (Collinson 1999, 2003).

An important issue for our research is to examine how, why and with what effects power, authority and control are exercised in the contemporary post-16 sector. Traditionally, power is examined in a top-down, hierarchical and sometimes coercive manner, based on the prerogative of individual leaders. However, particularly within the education sector, there is growing interest in new ideas about the way that leadership can be distributed down and through hierarchies (e.g. Gronn 2003, Harris 2005). Such ideas would seem particularly pertinent in the education sector where lecturers and teachers typically act as 'knowledge leaders' in the classroom.

Rejecting traditional models of 'top-down' command and control, contemporary thinking in education views leadership as a mutual, collaborative process. It is enshrined in ideas like 'post-transformational leadership' (Day et al 2000), 'pedagogical leadership' (Harris 2003) and 'distributed leadership' (Bennett et al 2003). Such approaches focus on leaders as facilitators of continuous improvement, on their ability to act with others, share power and responsibility through 'moral purpose' and by creating 'a community of learners'. Hence leadership in education is increasingly re-defined in terms of mobilising people to understand the problems they face and to address them together. With its emphasis on flatter hierarchies, team-working and collaborative models of leadership, this increasing focus on 'distributed' 'dispersed', 'informal', 'post-heroic', 'pedagogical' and 'servant' leadership raises the possibility of new forms of shared power, less distance and greater equality between leaders and led.

Such initiatives, however, are not without their dilemmas, difficulties and possible paradoxes. Some of the questions informing our research include:

1. How is it possible to distribute leadership without losing clear direction, vision and clarity? If leadership is shared and dispersed, do organisations also confuse or even undermine the legitimacy of their leaders? their hierarchical structures? their decision-making processes? and strategic visions?
2. How does the impetus to distribute leadership interact with the ever-growing managerialism of the post-16 education sector that is characterised by increasingly tight government monitoring, accountability pressures and stringent financial and behavioural targets? Is it possible to empower employees when funding is so closely tied to particular performance targets? Is there a recurrent tension between surveillance and distribution that has to be negotiated on a daily basis by those working in the post-16 sector?
3. Is the impetus to distribute leadership within the sector at odds with, and potentially contradicted by the tendency for successive governments to 'lead the sector' in a traditional top-down, hierarchical and rather dictatorial way? Current top-down reforms in the UK education sector (e.g. curriculum design, performance and results, accountability, monitoring and scrutiny etc) can create significant pressures on leader-led relations. These may produce counter-productive and unintended

effects on performance, such as high labour attrition rates, weakening trust, and employee demoralization that in turn can cut across and significantly weaken policies designed to distribute leadership.

4. It is also important to question exactly what it is that is actually being distributed. Is it power or is it responsibility? Does distributed leadership constitute a form of empowerment for employees or is it better understood as a new form of work intensification? If the latter, then 'distributing responsibility' could simply become another way for leaders to extend power and control over followers, but under the guise of 'empowering' them (whilst appearing to relinquish power and control).
Could distributed leadership become a way for leaders to deny responsibility and to 'pass the buck' to those in less senior positions?

Suffice it to say here, that issues of power and surveillance are particularly important features of leader-led relations and these are a central focus of our research.

DISTANCE BETWEEN LEADERS AND LED

A second inter-related issue for this research is the degree of 'distance' between leaders and led. This also constitutes a growing and important area of interest within leadership studies (e.g. Weibler 2004, Collinson 2005). Research demonstrates that distance between leaders and led can take many different forms. It also suggests that 'distance' (and 'proximity') are rather slippery concepts, difficult to pin down. Different writers on distance use different meanings. Katz and Kahn (1978) argued that **psychological** distance was a necessary prerequisite for charismatic leadership. Focusing on **social** distance, Shamir (1995) contends that charisma may emerge in both socially close and distant leaders (see also Yagil 1998 and Conger and Kanungo 1998). In his exploration of 'indirect leadership' Yammarino (1994) argues that distance may also take a **hierarchical** dimension. Including **physical** leader distance and **interaction frequency** in their definition of distance, Antonakis and Atwater (2002) recognise that physically close leaders may still maintain a high degree of social distance.

Clearly, maintaining (different aspects of) distance might enable leaders to reflect and to re-charge batteries, to escape everyday pressures, to appreciate the broader view of

sectors and markets, to focus on long-term strategic issues, to retain confidential information and avoid becoming entrapped in the minutiae of everyday organizational life. Equally, retaining a distance could enable leaders to make 'hard' decisions, give 'difficult' instructions and communicate 'painful' information. However, as Napier and Ferris (1993) contend, distance between supervisors and subordinates may also reflect and reinforce significant organizational problems. Leaders may use distance as a form of power and power as a form of distance (Collinson 2005). They can use those around them as a 'front' or as 'gatekeepers' to sustain their power and authority and to remain distant, unaccountable and unchallenged. This raises questions about whether some leaders prefer to remain separate and detached, even being uncomfortable with the very idea of talking with employees. In their search to maintain an identity of being 'in control', might some leaders be very reluctant to facilitate or listen to employee voice or actually to distribute leadership?

Other research suggests that leaders can become so detached from the led that their 'motivational' messages are ineffective (Collinson 1999, 2000, 2003). This distance between leaders and led can generate employee dissatisfaction as subordinates perceive leaders to be too detached and aloof from the realities of production and service. The vacuum created by leaders' (perceived) distance can lead followers to engage in forms of dissent. This very distance may itself facilitate the creation of organizational 'back regions' largely inaccessible to leaders and in which employees construct counter-cultural practices (Giddens 1984). Hence, leader distance and employee resistance can be mutually reinforcing in ways that may undermine or significantly weaken organizational effectiveness. Various writers argue that senior managers in further education can be so preoccupied with corporate identity, mission statements and strategic planning that they have indeed become estranged from their staff (Randle and Brady 1994, Gleeson and Shain 2003).

'Distancing' may also reflect highly masculine practices (Collinson and Hearn 1996, 2004). Feminist studies demonstrate that notions of leadership are often saturated with the gendered, masculine imagery of the assertive, heroic and individualistic male (Sinclair 1998). Some writers on gender see distancing oneself from the consequences of one's actions as a routine way that men reproduce 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 2005). By contrast, feminine leadership styles may be more 'relational' and proximate, based on

more personal forms of communication and thus designed to reduce distance between leaders and led (Fletcher 2001).

Suffice it to say at this point that these issues of distance and proximity are potentially significant dimensions of the dynamics between leaders and led. They are therefore important to consider when examining relations between Principals/Heads, their senior management teams, middle managers, lecturers/teachers and support/admin staff. Equally, they are potentially important factors in relations between post-16 organisations and those who formally evaluate their performance at national level.

INEQUALITY

Issues of inequality are also of particular importance in the post-16 education sector where FE organisations operate at the 'leading edge' of poverty and disadvantage in their local communities. FE colleges in particular play a key role in providing a 'second chance' for many students who, for a multitude of reasons, have under-achieved in mainstream education and/or who have experienced barriers to their education as a result of disadvantage, poverty and other domestic problems. **Colleges play a valuable, but often under-valued role in trying to ameliorate disadvantage and one of its most difficult associated effects: disengaged and ill-disciplined students.**

Not only is the importance of this role within local communities and economies under-estimated at national level, but colleges themselves within the UK education sector can become trapped within a similar vicious circle of disadvantage and low status to that experienced by some of their students. Certainly, FE colleges in particular are frequently viewed (and often experience themselves) as low status educational institutions, dealing with the most deprived and difficult students. They are typically perceived as being at the bottom of the U.K. educational 'pecking order' when compared with schools, Sixth Form Centres and Universities.

Issues of deprivation, poverty and inequality constitute an enormous leadership challenge for those in post-16 education. Colleges frequently 'inherit' many deep-seated community-based social and economic problems that are very difficult to change in any fundamental sense (particularly in the North of England). Many students from disadvantaged backgrounds enrol at F.E. Colleges in order to acquire less academic, more applied,

vocational and manual-based skills and knowledge. Equally, for adults seeking a way back into education and/or a change of career, accumulation of new skills and knowledge, **FE colleges can play a major (sometimes life changing, frequently life enhancing) role.**

While these issues of disadvantage within the sector focus most directly upon the FE colleges, they also increasingly impact on 6th Form Centres. Historically, 6th Form Colleges have tended to be dedicated to securing university places for relatively affluent and primarily middle class students. However, with the current pressure on 6th Forms to grow in size, they also are enrolling students from much wider and more diverse backgrounds. As the number of students attending 6th Forms has continued to grow, there has been a significant shift in the colleges' focus and remit and one that presents a very specific leadership challenge to these institutions, as their cultures change and teaching and administrative staff try to adjust and adapt.¹ This in turn raises questions about student disadvantage, particularly in relation to its impact on student recruitment, retention, performance and subsequent career trajectory.

Within everyday educational practices this class-based inequality can become intertwined with other aspects of disadvantage like gender and/or race and, as a result, can become extraordinarily difficult to change in a positive way. Disadvantage can take complex, multiple and frequently interwoven forms. This also raises considerable conceptual problems in making sense of different aspects of inequality. Our research suggests that it is problematic to try to make sense of different aspects of inequality and disadvantage in isolation from other aspects. So, for example, policies designed to 'extend access' to disadvantaged students need also to consider the gendered dimensions of this problem. Working class women students who are also single-mothers experience significant restrictions in their access to college, as Working Paper 2: Leadership Challenges elaborates.

On the one hand, treating different aspects of inequality as totally separate from one another can significantly distort analysis and subsequent recommendations. In some cases it can even produce new forms of elitism, that are then institutionalised and legitimised, paradoxically, through discourses of equal opportunities. Yet, on the other hand, insisting on the need to treat all forms of inequality simultaneously can lead to the

¹ One area where FE and Sixth Form Centres do remain distinct is in terms of funding and facilities.

reduction of deep-seated inequality to less significant issues of 'difference'. It is therefore important for researchers to tease out the inter-relations between various aspects of inequality and to reveal how these are frequently, not only inter-related, but also often mutually-reproducing and are thus significant leadership challenges for the post-16 sector.

Our research therefore examines other aspects of inequality as important features of leader-led relations. Assumptions about gender, race, ethnicity, age etc frequently inform, often in taken for granted ways, specific views about leaders. Notions of authority and leadership styles are often associated with 'great' and 'heroic' men (Calas & Smircich 1991). As many feminist studies demonstrate, workplace power relations can be highly gendered, with men's power and influence frequently remaining dominant in ways that reproduce women's marginalization (Cockburn 1991). While notions of leadership are often saturated with the gendered imagery of the assertive and heroic male, women have been largely excluded from senior positions (Sinclair 1998). Recent interest in men and masculinities in the workplace may also be particularly relevant for understanding leader-led relations in the post-16 sector (Collinson and Hearn 1994, 1996, 2003). As discussed in the previous section, the few women who 'make it' into leadership positions may adopt an even less distant and more proximate leadership style.

Suffice it to say here, that issues of inequality and diversity are particularly important features of leader-led relations in the post-16 education sector and these are a central focus of this research. Overall, this brief outline of our analytical concerns in relation to leader-led relations in the post-16 education sector reflects and reinforces a number of important leadership questions. By examining how the foregoing inter-related questions of power, distance and inequality impact on, and are shaped by, routine practices, we believe that our research can have important implications for leadership policy, development and practices in the post-16 education sector.

EXPLORING LEADER-LED RELATIONS

There have been comparatively few qualitative studies of leadership generally or in the post-16 sector more specifically. Even fewer have examined relations between leaders and led or explored these specific relationships in terms of power, distance and inequality. This three-year project uses qualitative research methods to examine leader-led relations in eight post-16 educational establishments in the North of England. Currently, intensive

research interviews are ongoing with leaders and led in 3 Further Education Colleges, and 2 6th Form Centres. A distinctive methodological approach of this project is the interviewing of respondents at different hierarchical levels beginning with Principals/Heads and moving down the organisations to student level. All respondents and institutions participating in the research have been assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

To date, a total of seventy-seven research interviews have been completed. Typically research interviews last approximately one hour. Research participants are very pressurised and can usually only provide this amount of time. Within each semi-structured interview, the same standard list of twelve questions is used to organise the process of enquiry. However, we also seek to leave as much space as possible within the time available for respondents to elaborate and to raise issues that they see as priorities from their perspective. Hence, a central concern of the research has been to try to remain as open as possible so that key themes could be defined and raised by research respondents themselves.

This first working paper emphasises three very positive findings from our FE research on leader-led relations. It outlines general views shared by post-16 employees at various hierarchical levels. Relating directly to our foregoing interest in power, distance and inequality, these are: the widely perceived importance of 'effective' leadership, the value of a consultative leadership style, and the continued high commitment of many employees. We will consider each of these general findings in turn.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP

As a starting point for our research, we wanted to establish whether the issue of leadership was thought to be important by those working in the sector. Interestingly, research interviewees have so far been unanimous in their view that leadership is a vital ingredient in the running of any educational establishment and one, if not **the** most important aspect of college governance. To date, the research has found no evidence that respondents were unsure of the role that leadership played within their college. The general view of respondents within the sector are illustrated by the following statements from interviewees at various hierarchical levels:

Q. How important is leadership?

“Leadership is vital and essential, setting the tone for an organisation is paramount.”

“It is crucial. I have worked for five different leaders and I know what a difference a good leader makes.”

“Within a college environment a good Principal, who is a good leader, is the key ingredient..... if you get someone good who can manage everything and enthuse people along the way then the college has a good chance.”

“Very important, it would be nice to know we had some strong leaders in Government.”

“It is vital, we have 25,000 students and 1,000 staff. We are the third largest employer in the area.”

The research findings to-date indicate that although staff may have differing views on the quality of leadership within their organisations, all respondents were unanimous in their view that good leadership was crucial to the effective running of colleges. We have found a very widespread recognition from research respondents that leadership occurs at many different hierarchical levels. It is by no means simply the province of the college Principal or the senior management team. Rather than romanticising particular leaders, respondents express a consistently strong preference for clarity of direction, consistency of approach and willingness to take responsibility on the part of all of those in senior positions.

LEADERSHIP STYLE

The second area relating to our findings considers the self-defined leadership style adopted by staff participating in the research. The responses to the question on respondents' preferred leadership style fell into two distinct definitions. The research has found that the most preferred and most frequently adopted style of leadership is a consultative approach. Within this open approach, a clear majority of the research respondents describe two different types of leadership style that we have identified as 'action-orientated' and 'collaborative'.

Q. How would you describe your leadership style?

The following statements are indicative of respondents who appeared to prefer an 'action-orientated' leadership style.

"In my first two years, my role was very internal. I never set foot outside. But it is more and more external, trying to locate the college as a big player in the local community. As the leader I see myself as accountable to the Board of Governors. The Governors are a good group of people."

"I interact with people at all levels. I recruited two black members of staff. Before that we were all white and all women. We needed to take positive action."

"A senior manager was sacked following feedback from staff. Staff were pleased they were listened to. At a practical level people need help. We need to improve systems."

"Three years ago I could not have described my leadership style. Now I make decisions with the option to discuss at a future point. I am meticulous in what I do. My route may be different from other managers but I get there."

"As a leader you need to choose different styles in different situations. You do that by knowing people and the situation. I need to look at what needs to change."

These respondents who adopt a (self-defined) action-orientated approach emphasised the benefits of an open and inclusive style of leadership and management but when they described their own approach they discussed positive actions they had taken to deal with specific issues.

In contrast, the second group of respondents stressed the importance of collaboration and teamwork when describing their leadership style, as the following statements demonstrate:

“I wouldn’t ask anyone to do something I wouldn’t be prepared to do myself. I am in charge of 20 course tutors. You can get some stronger members of staff trying to take advantage. My boss is very good at getting money in. On balance, I think my leadership style is sensitive to little things that are important to staff in day-to-day working.”

“I am a people person. I always listen to both sides. I like people to take ownership of a problem and to involve everyone in decisions. But I do recognise that after discussions a point is reached where a decision has to be made.”

“My style has evolved. It changes with the situation. Sometimes it is collaborative and sometimes directive. I just decide on what is best for the situation. If it is about people then I would say collaborative is my style. In teaching it is directive.”

“I came as a part-time member of staff in 1980. I was introduced by the old (female) Principal as the “new dogsbody.” My leadership style has evolved over time. I would never ask them to do anything I would not do myself. There is no difference between me, and the cleaner. I am prepared to do anything because I do believe in the college and what we have to offer.

All respondents have described the multiple channels of communication that exist within colleges with and between staff as facilitators of a consultative and engaged leadership style. Respondents have articulated the importance of involving staff in decision making and responding to staff concerns wherever possible. Women respondents in particular, stressed the importance of ‘leading by example’ as the following statement demonstrates,

“I would never ask anybody to do anything I would not be prepared to do myself.”

When describing their leadership style, many female interviewees have consistently repeated this statement (almost word for word). They emphasise the importance of leading by example and empathising with employees as a key element in their approach to leadership. This suggests that as part of their leadership style, female staff consider it particularly important for their colleagues to understand that, if necessary, they are ready

to undertake any task which they request of others. This tends to support the feminist theory outlined earlier that women may develop even more 'relational', personal and proximate forms of communication and leadership styles.

The majority of our respondents in the research institutions prefer, and try to adhere to, an open and engaged style of leadership as far as possible. These findings indicate that proximate forms of leader-led relations are much more evident and more valued within the sector.

HIGH STAFF COMMITMENT AND MOTIVATION

A third area that has been highlighted by the research is staff commitment. Given the subordinated position of the FE colleges within the educational hierarchy and the intensified monitoring and performance targets now embedded in the sector, perhaps the most surprising research finding is the continued high commitment of most employees in the post-16 education sector. The staff we have interviewed appear to be highly motivated, enthusiastic and very committed to the students and the colleges in which they work.

Respondents frequently articulate a close identification with the goals and objectives of the post-16 sector, often expressing pride in their college's contribution to the local community. They express a strong commitment to enhancing the educational achievements of the next generation of students and to providing an opportunity for many students who are in danger of 'missing the boat' in terms of education. Interviewees articulate a professional commitment to teaching but also a strong social ideal that they could 'make a difference' to the lives of their students. They seem highly committed to doing what they can to ameliorate the detrimental effects of wider and historically-embedded social inequalities.

The research has also found that praise and recognition are key motivators of staff. Whilst everyone we have interviewed recognises the pressing need to raise the financial reward structure within the post 16 sector generally and FE colleges in particular, a consistent finding is that praise and recognition are crucial in maintaining staff motivation, as the following responses illustrate,

Q What do you consider to be the most effective motivators of staff?

“You need to make sure that staff are told ‘well done’.”

“Praise and encouragement are vital. They are the best motivators of staff. You must also appear to be acting fairly and explain everything. You cannot just assume people understand what you are trying to do.”

“Praise and recognition are very important. Do not miss any opportunity to say ‘you are doing well’. This then enables you to address things that are not going well without resentment.”

“Praise, enjoyment and laughter. Establishing pride in a job well done is important.”

“It is important to have strong feedback and the recognition of people’s strengths.”

These initial research findings suggest that the FE and 6th Form teaching staff interviewed are motivated, very committed, highly skilled and often have considerable experience. They frequently undertake a remarkable amount of teaching with goodwill and enthusiasm, often willing to give of their ‘free time’ and going well beyond formal job descriptions and role expectations. A clear finding at this stage is that FE employees are highly professional, responsive and enthusiastic about their vocation. They are very committed to the learning and social benefits of post 16 education. Across the five organisations staff’s commitment to their students and their colleges remains high.

CONCLUSION

This first working paper has considered the importance of context for understanding the UK post-16 education sector. It is based on a research project that is informed by, and seeks to contribute to, recent developments in leadership studies. In particular, the project goes beyond the narrow ‘leader-centric’ approach of mainstream studies to explore

'leader-led relations' in the post-16 education sector. Our approach is informed by more critical perspectives that directly examine the complex dynamics between leaders and led within their specific conditions and consequences.

This more critical approach to leadership raises important questions about power, distance and inequality that, in turn, constitute significant leadership issues for those working in the post-16 education sector. In particular, they highlight the importance of the ways that **power** is exercised and/or 'distributed', **trust** and **communication** between leaders and followers is produced and maintained, **performance** and **commitment** is measured and rewarded and **disadvantage** and **inequality** are acknowledged and challenged. This critical focus on 'leader-led relations' can facilitate new insights into our understanding of leadership processes, raising important questions about what it means to be a 'leader' and a 'follower' and about the contemporary meaning of 'effective' leadership in specific, changing contexts.

The empirical findings outlined in this first paper have emphasised the widely perceived importance of leadership in the sector and the broadly preferred and implemented leadership style based on consultation and distribution wherever possible. The most unexpected finding of our research to date is the extent of staff morale, commitment, dedication and professionalism. While we had expected to encounter a demoralised, passive workforce, we have repeatedly interviewed staff at all hierarchical levels who are highly committed to their students, their colleges, the sector and the community they serve. Research interviewees have consistently talked about the importance of 'making a difference' and of enhancing the learning and social benefits for students in the UK post-16 education sector.

In sum, our preliminary research has found a general and widespread commitment to a distribution of power and responsibility, a strong preference for proximate (rather than distant) leadership styles (and 'leading by example' in the case of women respondents) and for reducing, wherever possible, the detrimental effects of disadvantage and poverty on student performance. Yet, despite these positive findings, we have also discovered a number of key leadership challenges for the post-16 education sector and these issues are addressed in our second working paper.

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