

## **Explorations of the Policy Drive to Foster a Research Culture within a Dual Sector Scottish HE Institution**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In August 2011, the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) celebrated the accolade of university title, becoming Scotland's newest university. Modelled on a federal, collegiate university based on a number of existing and geographically dispersed Further Education (FE) colleges and research institutions, the UHI has clearly abandoned the more conventional model of a single campus university in a single location. This study focuses on structural and cultural developments within the UHI arrangement. In particular, it explores the policy drive to foster such a research culture, focusing on the period from 2003 to 2009. The study identified two different types of performativity discourses that proved to be central in shaping the policy aspiration, namely a 'RAE performativity discourse' and a 'Further Education (FE) performativity discourse'. Both discourses can be seen to have influenced the trajectory of research expansionist policy within the UHI by setting up a normative space privileging certain identities, subjectivities and associated actions at the expense of others. The study aims to contribute to wider debates on institutional policies for building research capacity in a dual sector/hybrid institutional setting.

Note: This article is based on research findings from a Doctor of Education thesis completed by the author in 2011. The full research can be viewed at University of Stirling School of Education digital repository STORRE eTheses: <http://hdl.handle.net/1893/3031>

### **INTRODUCTION**

Further and higher education (FE and HE) in Scotland have traditionally been divided into two sectors with different organisational cultures and operating structures. However, in the last decade the boundary between them has become more porous with FE increasingly delivering HE courses and collaborating more and more with universities on a range of access courses and degrees. Indeed, this transition has been reflected in a number of academic studies on colleges delivering both FE and HE, commonly referred to as 'dual sector' or hybrid institutions (see Bathmaker 2007; Garrod and MacFarlane 2007; Smith et al, 2007; Bathmaker et al, 2008 and Bathmaker and Thomas 2009). By exploring how a number of FE colleges and research institutions have collaborated to form an HE institution - subsequently known as the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) - this study relates to the field of dual sector or hybrid institution research. The main aim of the study is to explore how this newly emerging HE institution attempts to embed a research culture within its FE partner institutions. The study is concerned with institutional transition in terms of both policy formation and interpretation. In considering policy formation and interpretation the study aims to identify the emerging discourses associated with the value and role of research within the UHI focusing on the period between 2003 and 2009. The main research question asks:

**What are the emerging discourses arising from the policy drive to foster a research culture within the University of the Highlands and Islands?**

Ball (1994) suggests discourse constructs 'heroes and villains', creates the space for action and, at the same time, excludes other possibilities. It attributes cause and effect,

legitimizes new voices and creates naturalising tendencies by construing events as logical, natural occurrences. Considering discourse within policy Edwards (2008: 21) observes: 'Through political and policy-making processes they [discourses] attempt to inscribe certain practices with particular kinds of meanings and position actors as having particular roles and dispositions, thereby shaping the institutional climate within which they work and live'. In attempting to capture, delineate and specify the range of discourses that are emerging from the policy drive to foster a research culture within the UHI, the study's aim is to contribute to wider debates on institutional policies and change. More specifically, the study will lend insights into debates surrounding the strategies for building research capacity and the development of research cultures in a dual sector/hybrid institutional setting.

As Scott (1996) highlights, institutional policies do not develop in a vacuum; instead they enter existing socio-economic conditions, policy structures, organisational cultures and power relations. These constraints and complexities have the potential to distort and reconfigure the intended meanings and enactment of policy goals. Policy analysis needs to take account of the fluid relationships between policy intentions, interpretations and enactments. As Taylor et al, (1997: 15) state:

To analyse policies simply in terms of the words written in formal documents is to overlook the nuances and subtleties of the context which give policy texts meaning and significance. Policies are thus dynamic and interactive, and not merely a set of instructions or intentions.

In order to take account of the potentially fluid relationships between policy intentions, interpretations, and enactments, the main research question was further broken down into a number of sub-questions.<sup>1</sup> To appreciate the dynamics of UHI's aspiration to foster a research culture, it is perhaps, beneficial to provide a brief historical background of UHI research expansion during the period under study.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: SETTING THE SCENE**

In 1993, Highlands and Islands Enterprise established the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) Project which was heralded by its advocates as a distinctively radical enterprise. The UHI blueprint was developed by Professor Sir Graham Hills (former Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow) in a document commonly known as the *Hills Report* (1992). The UHI, modelled on a federal, collegiate university based on a number of existing further education colleges and research centres and institutions (commonly referred to as academic partners) clearly abandoned the more conventional model of a single campus university housed in a single location.<sup>2</sup> In the autumn of 1996 the Millennium Commission awarded the UHI £33.35 million, one of the largest single awards in Scotland. This funding was for physical infrastructure, including a number of

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<sup>1</sup> It is argued that these sub-questions help to give insights into what Taylor et al., (ibid) refer to as the 'nuances and subtleties' of policy meanings and significance. The sub-questions include: How is the idea of a research culture perceived within the context of the UHI? How do individuals within the UHI Executive and stakeholders affected by the UHI research strategy perceive the policy aspiration of creating a research culture? How do individuals within the UHI Executive and stakeholders affected by the UHI research strategy perceive both the barriers and driving forces in promoting a research culture? How do individuals within the UHI Executive and stakeholders affected by the UHI research strategy perceive the impact of the Research Assessment Exercise on the organisation and structure of policy drivers aimed at expanding research? What are the emerging researcher identities within the UHI?

<sup>2</sup> Each academic partner has its own character; some are relatively large colleges in the urban centres of the region such as Perth, Elgin and Inverness. Others are smaller institutions, including some whose primary focus is on research. The UHI research centres include: The Centre for Mountain Studies; The Agronomy Institute; The Centre for Interpretation Studies; Centre for Nordic Studies; The Centre for Rural Health; Environmental Research Institute; The North Atlantic Fisheries College Marine Centre; The Centre for Remote and Rural Studies; The Scottish Association for Marine Science and The UHI Centre for History. Research at the FE partners include: Lews Castle College; Orkney College; Sabhal Mor Ostaig and Perth College.

campus-based building projects. It was also used to form an area network for communications and information technology. This network allowed the all-important technological foundations for linking the various partner institutions. Significantly, this initial investment was seen as providing the initial communications infrastructure that would help alleviate the obstacles of space, distance and dispersal that had previously stifled educational and social development in the Highlands and Islands (Hills and Lingard, 2004).

In 2001, the UHI was designated an HE institution formally known as the UHI Millennium Institute and in the summer of 2008 it was granted degree awarding powers. More recently (August, 2011), the UHI celebrated the accolade of university title, becoming Scotland's newest university.

Despite utilising technological advances, the UHI can still be described as a somewhat dispersed community, a differentiated system of large and small colleges and research institutions. For individual FE partners, the structural and cultural changes associated with being part of a federal, collegiate HE institution have been significant. Some of these changes include the formation of new partnerships on specific HE delivery programmes; the introduction of new academic curriculum areas and associated quality control and accountability systems; changing and evolving job roles and responsibilities; the hiring of new staff and upgrading of the academic profile and qualifications of existing staff; the acquisition of new buildings; the expansion and re-configuration of staff development and human resource systems; and changes to the role of particular spaces and places resulting from the creation of HE-specific teaching environments and study areas. Of course, because of their size, individual histories, structural arrangements and, perhaps most significantly, their overall agility in absorbing new directives from the UHI Executive Office, these changes have not impacted uniformly on the FE partners. Inevitably, this evolving university model can bring a number of organisational challenges as partner institutions attempt to balance their own individual institutional FE identity in terms of operating ethos and culture, positioning and defining themselves within a much wider institution. The potential difficulties associated with this should not be underestimated. Indeed, as earlier writings on the evolution of the UHI (Hills and Lingard, 2004) have highlighted, the transition to a federal collegiate arrangement was not without tension in terms of power struggles. Thus, it seems fair to say that any examination of the embedding of a research culture within the UHI - a dynamic closely aligned with the identity of HE - was going to be an interesting area of study in terms of developing understandings of organisational transitions where a number of separate institutions collaborate together to create an HE institution.

## **STRATEGIC PLANNING: HIGHLIGHTING THE NEED FOR A RESEARCH CULTURE**

The desire to foster a research culture developed into an overarching theme in the first UHI Strategic Planning Framework document (1998–2001) and all subsequent planning documents. Encompassing the notion of a research culture, the first strategic planning document (1998: 53) stated:

Research is central to the role of the UHI. As a provider of higher education one of its strategic aims is to expand UHI's research capability and imbue a self-sustaining research culture which will advance knowledge, support student learning and contribute to social and economic development.<sup>3</sup>

The ensuing years witnessed the introduction of a number of policies and initiatives geared towards the expansion of research. These included the provision of financial support and guidance (where appropriate) for existing and newly created research projects and institutions, the introduction of a sabbatical scheme for all UHI staff wishing to pursue research, the provision of financial support for staff development relating to research

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, at the time of writing this statement can still be found in the UHI Research Policy documentation.

degrees and the creation of a number of staff development programmes on research methodology skills. At first sight, this overall policy trajectory can be seen to advance what Deem and Lucas (2007:119), drawing on the research of others (Schimank and Winnes, 2000) refer to as the 'Humboldtian model', based on a close integration between teaching and research.

At an institutional level, the UHI Executive Office required all academic partners to draw up their own research strategies, setting up research committees to encourage, co-ordinate and support research activities that both align broadly with the aims of the UHI research strategy and also reflect their own individual strengths, opportunities and interests. Significantly, encouraged by the new emphasis placed on research by the UHI Executive, a few FE partners went as far as setting up research units and centres with full-time researchers in an attempt to kick-start a research profile within their institutions. Perhaps one of the most potentially groundbreaking initiatives to kick-start and guide research within the FE partners was the development of a scale of expected involvement in scholarship and research for all staff teaching at HE level. This scale (introduced 2006) identifies the level of involvement in scholarly/research activities commensurate with the level of teaching. In addition, in 2005 the UHI also introduced what was referred to as 'seedcorn funding' for research. Under this initiative financial support is made available to academic partners to support academic staff who wish to become involved in initial research activities as part of their own professional and academic development. Although the funding comes from the UHI Executive Office, the academic partners have the autonomy to run these schemes with their own locally defined and managed application, vetting, approval and project monitoring procedures. In very recent times (end of summer 2010) the need to sustain current research interests and foster new research opportunities prompted the UHI Executive Office to go as far as appointing a dean of research. The announcement of this newly created post makes clear that the development of a research culture throughout the partners continues to be a key aspiration for the UHI. Of course, the increasing importance given to the fostering of a research profile within the UHI during the last decade is not surprising given that research and related activities had increasingly been perceived in performative terms as an important benchmark for a university's academic status, not to mention an essential source of revenue (Henkel, 2000, 2005 and Smith, 2001).

Research expansion within the UHI was significant during the first decade of the new Millennium and much of this expansion has been strongly linked with the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) which takes place approximately every five years to assess research quality in all UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The results of the RAE are used by the Research Councils and the Funding Councils to apportion the amount of government funding each HEI receives. It is widely seen as a barometer for research quality by superimposing a common framework of specific research output criteria to be met within a set time period. Perhaps more than any other initiative, it had become part of what Henkel (2000) terms 'academics' assumptive worlds' creating a new time frame for the production of research. For the HE sector it enacted a new kind of symbolic power and status and operated as an indicator to other funding bodies as to where the best research areas and institutes could be found. As Deem and Lucas (2007: 125) note: 'The RAE has become new game in which research-active UK academics participate [...] and has emphasised particular forms of academic currency, such as research grants and refereed publications in international journals, as well as RAE grade-ratings.'

The drive by the UHI to increase its RAE submissions and ratings should not be underplayed. As one UHI Strategic Plan (2006-2008: 21) notes:

There are two key linked issues concerning research – sustainability and timing. Mindful, therefore, that those mediocre standards of research performance will not attract funding and that the RAE bar has continually been raised, achieving a high standard of excellence in our target fields very quickly is now vital in order to ensure sustainability or to achieve the standards necessary for inclusion in partnership (pools) which are forming amongst Scotland HEIs in some disciplines.

Applauding the pace of research expansion during this period, the subsequent UHI Strategic Plan (2008-2011: 11) stated:

We have been successful in attracting funding to develop our research capacity from the Scottish Funding Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, European structural funds and from private benefactors. Our submission to the 2007 research assessment exercise (RAE) achieved an increase of 400% in the number of academic staff compared with the 2001 submission.

In 2001, the UHI made submissions in only two disciplines for the RAE. In 2007, by contrast, the submissions increased to eight disciplines. The increase in UHI research population had been achieved through importing researchers from other universities/HE institutions to set up new research areas, increasing the capacity of existing research areas and absorbing or networking with other research institutions. As a result, UHI research has been promoted through various research centres and academic departments which include established research in environmental science, marine science, renewable energy and sustainability, health, history, archaeology and various developing research environments.

Perhaps one of the most significant developments at this time was the UHI Addressing Research Capacity project (ARC project)<sup>4</sup> set up in 2003 which was part of an overall strategy of attracting key researchers to the UHI to develop research capacity in the run-up to the UK RAE submission in 2007. This was pivotal in achieving the twin ends of increasing critical mass for the RAE and strengthening the overall research culture in certain areas of the UHI, especially in 2006, when the project was awarded £11.4 million for creating new research chairs, high-level research fellowships, and new research positions and supporting structures. The appointment of new research professors, from other HE institutions was perceived as significant in that they would enhance performance ratings and generate extra funding in certain areas. Equally important, it was hoped that they would lay the foundations of a new research culture in these areas by leading other members of staff into research and helping to galvanise research units.<sup>5</sup>

## **RESEARCH EXPANSION: THE CONTRIBUTION FROM THE FE PARTNERS**

The overall picture that emerges is one that suggests that the UHI ambition to create a research culture – perceived here as the creation and embedding of structures and norms that encourage and value research activities within and between the UHI partners – has not yet materialised across the UHI. Although many FE academic partners have set up research centres they are generally seen as detached from the normal culture or structure of the rest of the FE College.<sup>6</sup> The overwhelming majority of staff within the FE academic partners

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<sup>4</sup> In celebrating the advances made through the ARC project, the UHI Annual Review of 2006 (6) noted: The build-up of UHI's research strength – another important step towards university title – has continued apace over the last year with 30 researchers recruited to work in marine science, environmental science, diabetes, neuro-developmental biochemistry and alternative crop research. Research staff of all levels have been appointed to the Scottish Association for Marine Science, the Environmental Research Institute at North Highland College UHI, the Agronomy Institute at Orkney College UHI, and the UHI faculty of Health. Eleven PhD students have also started their research programmes with four more due to begin work. The posts have been made possible by an £11.4 million funding package over four years [...].

<sup>5</sup> During 2003-2008 the number of research centres within the UHI expanded from 7 to a total of 15. Some of the new research centres included: Centre for Nordic Studies (2004); Centre of Policy Web (2004); The UHI Decommissioning and Environmental Remediation Centre (2004); Sustainable Development Research Centre (2004); The Centre for Rural Health (2005); The UHI Centre for History (2005) The Centre for Interpretation Studies (2007).

<sup>6</sup> On the issue of the different cultures between FE and researchers, one FE partner leader had this to say: 'At the minute what we have is the sort of world of teaching, learning or lecturing. I think we have a strong learning and teaching culture but, research-wise what we have is a few people 'over there' [research unit] who do a bit of research – something we don't really know very much about. And the research culture element will not really take hold until the climate is right and the opportunities are right, when people will be able to engage in it as part of their fundamental role and not as something they add on to their day when they have a few hours to spare and when they are not asked or expected to do something else.' (Interviewed by author, November: 2007)

teaching on UHI degree level courses are not yet immersed in an institutional environment where research activities are a normal part of the working culture. Thus, with respect to notions of a research culture, the study found that UHI partnership can be described as a divergent and loosely interlaced community rather than one characterised by a tightly bound configuration. Given that the UHI policy statements reflect the need for research to underpin teaching, this overall lack of research growth within the FE academic partners can be seen as particularly concerning. Indeed, the overall lack of progress in embedding a self-sustaining research culture within the FE academic partners raises questions on how UHI policy on research expansion has impacted on their institutional culture and operational structures. Although the potential challenges associated with the embedding of a research culture have been formally recognised by the UHI in strategic documents, what is less understood and less openly discussed are the dynamics of human agency in the interpretation and subsequent enactment of UHI policy on research expansion.

Drawing on what Mercer (2007) describes as ‘insider’ experience<sup>7</sup> together with some insights gained from early research studies (taking place between 2001-2002, as part of a taught doctorate programme), a number of potential difficulties surrounding the policy goal of fostering a research culture within the FE setting emerged. The first difficulty related to the actual structural arrangements of the UHI. Given that the UHI is constituted by a number of FE institutions and research institutes - each exhibiting different organisational structures and practices, local histories and associated myths and rituals - UHI policy implementation was not likely to be absorbed and internalised in a smooth, monolithic or unitary fashion but inevitably subjected to some form of alteration. Within the diverse community of stakeholders that constitute the UHI, the values and behaviours encouraged or underwritten by UHI policy makers and articulated in strategic planning documents are filtered through certain political, economic and social predispositions and thus, are open to what Scott (1996: 78) refers to as interpretational slippage: ‘Policy texts are not closed, their meanings are neither fixed nor clear, and the ‘carry-over’ of meanings from one policy arena and one educational site to another is subjected to interpretational slippage and contestation.’

The second difficulty in embedding a research culture within the FE partners is linked to the traditional cultural and operational culture of these organisations. Within this context it is important to note that FE academic partners have no history of carrying out research activities and no established operational orientation for research and related activities. FE colleges are organisationally and culturally orientated towards generating their income from the provision of a taught curriculum; it is teaching delivery that is the shared touchstone and not research activities.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A constructivist grounded theory approach was adopted for this study. It can be seen as an integrated theoretical formulation that generates understanding about changing responses and experiences of persons, organisations or communities to events that occur (Corbin and Holt, 2005). The inherent flexibility within this form of grounded theory was seen as significant given that the UHI was and is an institution undergoing rapid change, made up of different FE colleges and research institutes, each with its own individual working structures and cultures but at the same time interconnected to the UHI Executive Office. Moreover, the UHI policy trajectory surrounding research is continually developing and responding to internally and externally driven political, social, economic and structural changes and pressures. Thus, the complexity of the UHI as a dispersed institution (multi-site institution) is likely to mean that multiple discourses, meanings and approaches will be evident to a greater extent than found in a more traditional HE organisational setting and that applying a version of constructivist grounded theory would allow this complexity to surface

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<sup>7</sup> Mercer describes the insider as: ‘someone whose biography gives them a lived familiarity with the group being researched while the outsider is a researcher who does not have intimate knowledge of the group being researched prior to entry into the group.’ (2007: 3).

and be captured. According to Charmaz (2006) constructivists should gain multiple views of the phenomenon under investigation and locate it with a web of significance - of both connections and constraints. Highlighting the way in which this constructivist approach is placed against a wider backdrop of implicit and explicit dynamics Charmaz (p. 130) states:

The logical extension of the constructivist approach means learning how, when, and to what extent the studied experience is embedded in larger and, often, hidden positions, networks, situations and relationships. Subsequently, differences and distinctions between people become visible as well as the hierarchies of power, communication and opportunity that maintain and perpetuate such differences and distinctions. A constructivist approach means being alert to conditions under which such differences and distinctions arise and are maintained.

Data gathering involved thirty semi-structured taped interviews conducted with a heterogeneous sample of respondents working within the UHI at different levels. The sample involved policy makers, FE leaders, directors of research units and senior staff within the UHI Executive Office who had a role in promoting research and teaching academics across the UHI partners who are required to become research active in some way. The interviews were conducted in three main phases over a period from 2003 to 2008. In each of the phases, the interview was transcribed and processed (coded for potential themes) before moving on to the next. During this time a number of significant structural and policy changes took place regarding research expansion. As the study progressed, the themes generated from the interview data helped to signpost and tease out the emerging discourses. In addition to the three main phases, a final round of interviews between 2008 and 2009 was conducted with main goal of gaining respondents' feedback on the categories emerging from the data. The final round of interviews numbered four respondents previously interviewed.

## **FINDINGS**

The study found that the concept of 'performativity' was evident within the narratives on research expansion. Discussing the general effects of performativity on education, Ball (2003: 216) notes that performativity not only creates competition, new structures and associated value systems but, also gives rise to certain tensions and struggles between individuals' values and frames of reference and those set by performativity criteria. His formulation is worth quoting at length:

Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control [...] and change based on rewards and sanctions [...]. The performances [of individuals/organisations] serve as measures of productivity or outputs, or displays of 'quality' [...]. As such they stand for [...] or represent the worth or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement. [...] One key aspect of the current educational reform movement may be seen as struggles over who controls the field of judgement and its values. [...] Who is it who determines what is to count as a valuable, effective or satisfactory performance and what measures or indicators are considered valid?

Similarly, Strain (2009) believes the realm of performativity refers to the enactment of reform objectives, to how groups and individuals are inscribed in and respond to the officially sanctioned imperatives for change. In this sense, educational policy and performance indicators can be perceived as politically imposed norms, a script creating new roles, subjectivities and identities for the world of education. Performativity can be seen as Strain (p. 75) argues: 'as a mode of identity construction in institutionalised social space.' Within this context, educational institutions are required to respond to the plethora of centrally prescribed policy directives designed to classify, monitor, inspect and judge their activities. This is a significant point as it underscores how in certain circumstances – and to differing degrees – performativity discourses cultivate belief systems that privilege some forms of

activities and identities (constructed within an institutional space) over others. Such performativity-cultivated practices are less likely to be receptive to ideas or practices that are perceived to be out of line with the 'regimes of truths' embedded within the performativity script.

When discussing what they perceived as a research culture, the study found that all respondents involved in UHI research policy making, drew comparisons with their previous experiences working in HE or their involvement in research institutions and, as such, common features emerged. In other words, the study found that there were shared understandings of notions of a research culture among those respondents with past histories working for other HE institutions and research institutions. These shared understandings were more than a set of attitudes or value systems. They further incorporated professional relationships and climatic conditions such as structural and organisational supporting mechanisms to encourage and sustain research as well as to promote research expansion.

Moreover, external performance indicators for funding were also seen to play a significant role in the shaping of a research culture. All the aforementioned factors were perceived as constituent parts of a research culture and generally associated with HE. It was also widely recognised by this group of respondents that the UHI's conception of research culture *per se* was not out of step with that found in other, more established HE institutions. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the study found that for those located within the FE partners, their lack of previous experience of working in HE or involvement in research institutions was apparent and meant that they were less confident in describing the constituent parts of a research culture and how it might be shaped by internal factors and external dynamics.

It was also found that respondents felt that, with reference to research issues, the partners did not communicate or collaborate as effectively as they might or should do. This sense of a fragmented community was seen to be attributed to a number of interlaced factors. For many – especially those involved in policymaking at some level – there were some fundamental fracture lines within the UHI research expansion policy. Indeed, a number of those respondents involved in policy making felt that the overall policy aspiration to foster a research culture within the FE partners was perhaps unrealistic because it did not adequately account for the particular operating structures and attitudes embedded within these institutions. There was the overall perception that FE structural arrangements and a working culture (sometimes used interchangeably with the term 'FE mindset') that valued teaching over research acted as a powerful counter current to UHI aspirations on research expansion. Moreover, some researchers felt that the Executive Office policy drive lacked the necessary momentum to overcome this perceived barrier. In fact, with regard to UHI policy, many respondents across all levels of the interview sample adopted a somewhat sceptical, if not cynical, attitude towards the aspiration to expand research within the FE partners, claiming that the policy drive from the UHI Executive Office needed to be more authoritative in order to persuade partners to become research active. More specifically, there was a belief that a research culture would not, and could not be embedded unless fundamental changes were instigated, such as a change in contractual conditions for those staff teaching HE within the FE partners. In other words, it was widely felt that the FE academic contract was an obstacle to the aspiration to foster a research culture. These dynamics can be seen to resonate with Ball (1994: 19) who notes that 'the enactment of policy texts relies on such things as commitment, understanding, capability, resources, practical limitations, cooperation and intertextual compatibility.' This 'intertextual compatibility' is significant here as it refers to how new policies interact with existing policies.

The study also found that those teaching within the FE partners attempting to do research in some way identified themselves as individuals not embedded within a collective or supportive research community. The evidence suggests that research was not generally seen as part of the 'lived reality' of the FE institution. Research activities were not seen as having a prevailing input into the overall success of curriculum areas, departments and individual career advancement. Instead, it was perceived as more of a sideline to the real activities, especially if research activities were not seen as generating income in some way.



In addition, some FE staff interviewed, felt that, compared to their own working conditions, academics working in HE institutions had better supporting structures for their research. A number stated they were reluctant to become involved in research because they did not enjoy the same working conditions as those in a more traditional university setting. It was felt that academics within other universities had less teaching and thus more time and opportunity to carry out research compared to those staff teaching HE in the UHI FE partners. Within this context, this study identified an element of 'othering' taking place. 'Othering', as it is referred to here, is an approach an individual may adopt to both define and secure the contours of their own position and identity through projecting an image and identity on an 'other'. In other words, within the context of this study 'othering' took place as a strategy to confirm a respondent's own identity, role and position by projecting an identity, role and position on others. The study also found that some respondents involved in UHI policy making and researchers located within the FE partners made reference to this 'othering' process, claiming that some FE staff teaching HE tended to idealise the policy structures that encouraged and nourished research in other universities.

The study further noted that economic imperatives were perceived as paramount, particularly for those policy makers within the Executive Office and those attached to the Executive Office with responsibilities to encourage, co-ordinate and expand research within their respective curriculum areas. With respect to this economic imperative, the RAE was seen as increasingly central in determining as well as measuring the way in which research was conducted in the UHI. As such it was involved in promoting certain meanings and attitudes. By way of example, it was constantly referenced as key in framing the UHI research expansion trajectory including a range of strategic decisions about UHI goals, structures of staffing and the allocation of research funds. It was seen as particularly forceful in creating new research-centred staffing policies. It was also felt by many that the dominance of the RAE agenda meant that the UHI was concentrating its strengths in particular research areas at the expense of others. This in turn, reinforced hierarchical attitudes as a consequence of which those contributing to the RAE would be given a higher status than those who did not. In this context, some respondents maintained that research funding seemed to prioritise specific areas pointing towards an elitist structure, with areas such as social science pushed to the periphery by science-based activities. It was found that research associated with the RAE was perceived as far more exclusive and elitist than other research activities such as small-scale, individual, non-income generating research, with the exception of PhD research. The study also found evidence to suggest that there was a perception, mainly on the part of individual researchers and those attached to the Executive Office with responsibilities to encourage, co-ordinate and expand research within their respective curriculum areas, that more attention should be given to other areas not necessarily ready to contribute to the RAE criteria, suggesting that the current research expansion trajectory was too narrow and a more widespread approach in terms of expanding research focus and interests should be adopted. With regards to the FE partners' ability to embrace UHI expansionist policies, the RAE was used in part to reinforce 'othering' ideas that the FE partners were simply not ready to create a space for research to be embedded in. From the overall interview data a number of recurring themes were apparent: the perception of insufficient communications and networking; the idea that FE partners for a number of interrelated reasons seemed to be struggling to embed the notion of a research culture as well as the awareness of the increasing dominance of the RAE in shaping a normative space for research. This latter dynamic was seen to stimulate a counter current advocating that the UHI research focus should be widened beyond the RAE criteria.

Some of the perceived practical and conceptual difficulties highlighted here resonate with other wider studies. With respects to research cultures, Deem and Lucas (2007: 125-126) found considerable variation within their multi-site case study (education departments in two English universities and three Scottish universities), with some research departments being perceived as having 'individualised and segregated research cultures' while other departments showed evidence of having 'collaborative and inclusive research cultures'. For

Deem and Lucas (p. 130) 'local cultural context' and the 'broader policy context' are clearly embroiled in sustaining and developing research cultures.<sup>8</sup>

On the subject of research within the FE context, Rowley (1996: 75), in a pilot study considering the tension between research and teaching in FE, found that staff involved in the delivery of undergraduate and equivalent level courses experienced difficulties in carrying out research because of heavy teaching commitments. Similarly, Elliott (1996) claims that the collective world of FE does not have a research culture and, with the exception of a limited number of self-motivated and dedicated individuals, is not engaged in research of an exploratory nature, (i.e. research activities beyond market research). Elliott (107) emphasises the peripheral status of research when he states: [...] 'the current priorities and operational pressures of FE, especially those arising from managerialist agendas, may be seen as a highly effective ideological device for neutralising the development of a research culture.' Evidence of the lack of appreciation of those wider intellectual cultural dynamics associated with the HE landscape has also been picked up by Young (2002) in her studies analysing those teaching HE in a FE setting. She notes perceptions that academic prowess and scholarship in general were not particularly valued by management. According to Young (p. 283) this was manifested by a promotional structure that predominantly placed skills in human resource management above academic and scholarly abilities. In other words, FE promotional structures can impede the embedding of a research culture because they offer few incentives for staff to carry out research in terms of promotional benefits. Given that these commentators are discussing the English FE sector in general, and not a unique hybrid FE/HE institution such as the UHI, one could not, of course, suggest an explicit correlation between the observations above and some of the issues identified in this study.

However, the aspiration to promote a research culture within Scottish FE has not been something unique to UHI Executive Office. In a Scottish Further Education conference on exploring the potential role of research with Scottish FE, the Depute Chief Executive of the SFEU, John McCann (Paper at SFEU Research Conference '*Enhancing Quality Through Research*', 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2007: 1) rejected tokenism in respect of research and called for a holistic approach firmly embedded in the college culture: 'all parties need to work together - it is not about "researchers" and "non-researchers" - research needs to become part of the educational landscape rather than being regarded as something that is nice to have as an additional extra.' In an age of the blurring of the boundaries between HE and FE, this new trajectory for FE may arguably be simply part of the political *zeitgeist*. However, the structural and cultural difficulties to overcome were not glossed over at the conference. As the keynote speaker Professor David James (2007: 1) noted:

If a research culture is to be established in Scotland's colleges, then it is important to acknowledge that there will be difficulties. At the subject level, physical and psychological 'silos' need to be broken down. Further, the promotion of research requires leadership that has vision and future planning, and management [...] instead of managerialism.

James's keynote speech seems to be advocating the subversion of some of the hegemonic management systems in the FE sector when he went on to argue that, if colleges are to create a space that enables staff to carry out research, then college managers and staff alike need to set aside the penchant to desire tangible, visible and immediate outcomes and appreciate how research in the long term is central to mobilising intellectual growth within their institution and the sector more generally.

When discussing the overall impact of RAE, Lucas (2007), who looked at academics working within education departments in Scottish and English universities, observed how the RAE has served to increasingly divide the higher education sector and further fragment

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<sup>8</sup> When discussing the important research difference between Education Departments in England and Scotland, Deem and Lucas (p.130) note: 'These relate to the historical and current importance of research in institutions, different macro level policies on higher education in general and teacher training in particular and different views on the value of educational research.'

academic work by creating a polarisation of power and status in relation to research and teaching - with research being perceived as having higher status. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Lucas (p. 26) noted: 'the more research-intensive institutions [...] had a greater infrastructure for supporting research activities and the development of staff than is possible at the more teaching-intensive universities [...].' In considering counter-measures to such disparity she (p. 26) states: 'Differentials of capability, however, can potentially be overcome with greater collaboration across institutions.' Her study also examined how academic staff from a background in FE who have no experience in research can be encouraged and supported to do research. To encourage wider participation in research activities within the Scottish university context, Lucas (p. 26) found that the leadership styles of senior members of staff within departments was important. Also, what she describes as greater 'connectivity' between experienced and non-experienced researchers (through involvement with research projects, applying for research funding and writing for publication) had been instrumental in encouraging staff to become research active. However, although her study found significant evidence of this within departments, perceptions that more could be done to encourage greater connectivity between experienced and newer researchers were also highlighted.

### **LOCATING THE INTERVIEW DATA WITHIN BROAD CATEGORIES**

From the coding processes, the social, structural, economic, political and cultural dynamics relating to research data was located within a number of broad categories which was further divided into political strategies and perspectives. It is also significant to note that some of these political strategies and perspectives can incorporate certain discursive strategies - defined here as drawing on certain constructions and framings in order to selectively mobilise particular meanings, attitudes and identities (Arnott and Ozga, 2009).

**1 'Egalitarian'**: a political and discursive strategy adopted by some interview respondents positing the view that every UHI partner should have the opportunity to apply for UHI funding to develop a research profile.

**2 'Opting Out'**: a political and discursive strategy adopted by some interview respondents drawing on what can be seen as ill-informed ideas (what may be described here as idealistic notions) of how academic research takes place within the UK university sector when constructing their identity within the institution and vis-à-vis their relationship to research. Respondents adopting this strategy constructed certain narratives about researchers operating in HE in order to legitimise why they themselves had opted out of being involved in research and related activities. The interview evidence suggested that both UHI policy makers and academics active in research within their own partner institutions drew upon this opting out strategy to explain why research had not expanded within some of the FE partners.

**3 'Fragmented community'**: a perspective adopted by some interview respondents maintaining that the UHI partners were not communicating in a way that promoted research. Many respondents saw this fragmentation as either blocking or slowing down the embedding of a research culture within the UHI partners.

**4 'Sceptical'**: a perspective adopted by some interview respondents maintaining that research was not supported in the way that it should be. Its proponents expressed the view that FE colleges needed to change their working conditions if research was going to expand in a way that would meet the aspiration set out in the strategic plan. The desire for working contracts that mirrored the HE working contracts were seen as a condition common to this position. This perspective may also be seen to have utilised 'othering' by projecting notions of how an FE mindset could deflect the aspiration for a research culture. Thus, this sceptical perspective may also be seen to contain elements of a discursive strategy.

**5 'Performance Imperative'**: this is a policy strategy and may operate as a discursive strategy to achieve change. It was informed by two interrelated dynamics. One posited the view that research contributing towards the RAE should take priority over other research activities. This was a persistent theme to surface and could be seen to have generated

feelings of inclusion and exclusion vis-a-vis research activities and ultimately impacted on perceptions surrounding researcher identities. In other words, the RAE was being used as a yardstick to measure the potential worth of research. Its advocates believed the RAE created new roles, subjectivities and identities within the UHI. The other dynamic constituting this policy strategy was firmly located in the operation of FE partners and their shaping by FE performativity policy. More specifically, it was associated with perceptions of the FE partners' overall operating culture and structures. Its advocates perceived that the FE partners, due to their traditional culture and structural arrangements predominantly geared towards teaching delivery, had intrinsic barriers to opening up a space for research activities. In other words, its advocates believed that FE partners – by virtue of adhering to their own FE performativity – restrained UHI policy aspirations to expand research because they lacked the necessary culture and structural apparatus to nourish, sustain and legitimise research. This FE dynamic was also used to justify the shaping of UHI research expansion by the RAE.

The first four political strategies and perspectives might go some way towards helping to capture the essence of participants' narratives, while at the same time presenting these stories within an overall informative framework to elucidate how the aspiration to foster a research culture had been perceived by those affected by it. The study found that the performance imperative proved to be the best construct through which to understand the dynamic social power relations and emerging dominant discourse influencing and informing the fostering of a research culture within the UHI. The intention is not to suggest that the first four strategies and perspectives lack relevance. Instead it is argued that the performance imperative is an integrated conceptualisation in that it discursively engages with all the other strategies and perspectives at some level. Moreover, it introduces a number of structures, procedures and attitudes that ultimately converge in intended and unintended ways that both re-energise and redraw the boundaries, ultimately creating patterns of power relations among different groups, as well as perceptions that reflect something close to a typology of what counts as research and, by extension, who is a researcher. The identified strategies and perspectives inevitably have underlying discourses and these will be discussed next.

## THE EMERGING DISCOURSES

The study found that each of the political strategies and perspectives draws on certain underlying discourses which highlight aspects of understanding of social agency and social intentionality within the context of UHI research.

**'Egalitarian'**: this political strategy can be seen to draw upon Enlightenment discourses of freedom and equality. It is not against diversity in the way research is conducted, nor is it the goal to make everyone the same when it comes to researcher identity. It aims to establish political, economic and social conditions in which people will be able to enjoy equally worthwhile research opportunities and working conditions. It is not about blanket uniformity, but about levelling the conditions of social existence within the realm of research expansion within the UHI. It seeks to redraw the boundaries inscribed within those discourses that seem to encourage and support elitist attitudes and structures.

**'Opting Out'**: this political strategy can be seen to draw on an underlying discourse of liberalism suffused with elements of 'othering'. Drawing upon the discourse of liberalism, it champions the view that individuals should have the freedom to choose whether they wish to be involved in research or not. It advocates freedom and guaranteed rights for those who wish to be involved with research. In the context of the UHI, advocates subscribing to this opting-out political strategy believe they should have the same rights and opportunities as those carrying out research in traditional universities. It is here that we can see the working of 'othering' appearing. Advocates subscribing to this strategy maintain that they should have the same working conditions as those working in the more traditional universities and thus project a particular view of HE. Under this 'othering', the HE lecturer/academic is constructed as having very low teaching commitments, and as such, as able to devote most

of the working week to research. This 'othering' of HE is used as a reference point against which to evaluate UHI expansionist policy. More importantly it is used as a way of exposing perceived weaknesses in the FE institution.

**'Fragmented Community'**: this perspective can be seen to draw upon an underlying communitarian discourse with overtones of new managerialism. It emphasises the self as being embedded within a community. It resonates with the ideas of partnership and networks and rejects what it perceives as the corrosive effects of working in isolation where the self-interest of individuals or institutions dominates. Within the context of the UHI research, it argues that the UHI partnership is fragmented, and the FE colleges and research institutes are too absorbed in their own respective self-interests and lack the drive to explore what others are doing in the area of research. It advocates that the UHI Executive Office needs to do more to encourage a better organised communications strategy between partners on the subject of research. It is within the context of the demand for a better organised communications strategy that new managerialism comes into play.

**'Sceptical'**: this perspective draws upon elements of a managerial discourse. It rejects the UHI current policy on research as lacking essential foundations for success. It views the aspiration for a unified research culture for all partners as a doomed project because it suffers from a lack of basic structures. In this sense, it rejects other discourses encouraging individual partner autonomy whereby institutions can decide working conditions. Within this perspective, the UHI research expansion goals are re-articulated more towards human resource management. There is a perceived need to take more control and specifically to introduce contractual obligations that maximise research expansion and output. Its proponents express the view that, with respect to research, FE colleges are unconstrained and have too much autonomy. The solution is more structural control from the centre in the form of a new working contract emphasising direct engagement in research activities for those FE partners.

**'Performance Imperative'**: this is informed by an underlying performativity discourse, the examination of which can help to understand some of the wider economic and political processes at play. As covered elsewhere, the performativity discourse relates to the enactment of reform objectives, how groups and individuals are inscribed in and respond to the officially sanctioned imperatives for change. Within this context, educational policy and performance indicators can be perceived as a script creating new roles, subjectivities and identities for the world of education. This study has identified two dominant interrelated performativity discourses influencing and informing the fostering of a research culture within the UHI: namely 'RAE performativity discourse' and 'FE performativity discourse'. The former focuses on strict research quality criteria and the latter on the predominance of teaching delivery. It is argued here that these performativity discourses proved to be the best conduit for understanding the perceived successes and tensions associated with UHI research expansion by helping to illuminate the micro processes within the UHI. Under these performativity discourses there is a distrust of anything that threatens or opens up established parameters and identities. They produce certain realities and hierarchical relations of power identities. For example, the RAE performativity discourse advocates that research institutions such as The Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) and the Environmental Research Institute (ERI) are the elite and therefore should get the best resources. The RAE performativity discourse can be seen to have both stimulated and circumscribed debates on research expansion. On one level, it can be described as having been instrumental in changing what many respondents described as an *ad hoc* approach to a more focused outlook on research development, generating in turn the all-important income for further growth. However, on another level, this RAE performativity discourse may have reinforced certain misgivings about the FE sector and, as such, may have closed down or delayed any potential debates surrounding the actual role and contribution of FE in the drive to expand research.

In contrast, the FE performativity discourse ensures that teaching delivery is paramount and should not be displaced by other activities such as research. Indeed, under this FE performativity imperative, the notion of a researcher identity would be seen as being in

conflict with the teacher identity. In the light of FE performativity criteria, the identity of the researcher is seen to attain a somewhat alien or even transgressive status, as being outside the FE normative space. This sense of exclusion/inclusion was encapsulated by a researcher/lecturer working for a FE partner institution who claimed: 'I am seen as a maverick, which I think says something about how research is perceived within my institution. I know that [name of other researcher/lecturer in different FE partner] is also seen as a maverick within their institution.' (Interviewed by Author April 2006). The signifier 'maverick' seems apt as it is generally referred to as a non-conformist, a person seen as unconventional and detached from the customary practices, cultural norms and values of the group. Another respondent, with management responsibilities at an FE partner, may be seen to encapsulate how the FE performativity discourse may actually impede the overall aspiration to expand research by locating it on the periphery of the main activities of FE:

As an operational manager I have to achieve targets set by strategic managers. [...] Firstly, hard targets: the business imperative, so to speak. They are usually centred on financial matters and efficiency gains such as increased student numbers, reducing teaching hours for each subject unit, etc. These are the must achieve targets. [...] Ultimately, the operational survival of my department depends on securing these hard targets. Secondly, firm targets: These are usually centred on business improvements, e.g. quality enhancement, use of ICT in delivery methods. These are generally must achieve targets. However, if they are not achieved the implications are not as serious as for missing hard targets. Thirdly, soft targets: these targets are considered the nice to have targets and generally, for most FE managers, the topic of research activities falls into this category. There are few implications if these soft targets are not achieved. (Interviewed by author, April: 2009)

## CONCLUSION

This study found that, although policies to encourage and expand research activities may well have woven themselves through different institutions and groups linked to the UHI, they did not seem to have been compelling and resilient enough to pacify or obliterate potential or actual sites of resistance and therefore embed themselves sufficiently to constitute what might be referred to as a unified culture throughout. This study has argued that the performance imperative, with its attendant RAE and FE performativity discourses, has emerged to occupy a dominant place in the understanding on research expansion within the UHI. However, it is important to underline that it is not claimed that these discourses have operated, or are operating, to wield coercive power, imposing unnecessary bureaucracy on everyday events, or their will on the part of one dominant group upon an unwilling and subordinate other. Rather, taking a lead from Foucault (1980), it is argued here that discourses operate in a more subtle capillary fashion - depending upon the specific context - penetrating into the very core of individuals constructing their meanings and realities.

The FE performativity discourse - with its plethora of prescribed policy directives designed to classify, monitor, inspect and judge FE activities - had a prevailing influence in constituting a normative space that did not create a positive climate in which research might embed. With respect to socio-cultural barriers, the study found that the FE performativity discourse tended to confer values, beliefs, social structures and identities that emphasised teaching delivery over and above research activities. As such, it failed to open up a space for research activities to become enshrined in the form of mission goals whereby research would no longer be a matter of individual pursuit, but of collective interest to the organisation instead.

The study found that there was a shared perception amongst respondents that the RAE performativity discourse has had a prevailing influence in constituting a normative space for research expansion within the UHI from 2001 to 2006. On one level, it can be described as having been instrumental in changing what many respondents described as an *ad hoc* approach to a more focused outlook on research development, thus increasing research capacity. However, on another level, the RAE performativity discourse can be seen to have

created webs of significance where inclusion and exclusion appear to have shaped attitudes on research and researcher identities. It helped to reinforce certain misgivings about the actual role and contribution of FE in the drive to expand research. Of course, the idea that the RAE has impinged on research choices, agendas and researcher identities - ultimately creating a value framework of what constituted research and who was a researcher - is not new. This sense of forging an identity around research performativity has been noted by Edwards et al., (2004: 125-126):

Many academics welcome and applaud the very emphasis now placed on research by governments and universities. As Ball points out, with this emphasis academics can fashion themselves as 'triumphant selves' with subjectivity that encompasses feelings of pride and achievement. Ball argues that there is something very seductive about being ascribed excellence, being relevant, and about performing well, having that recognised. [...] what this implies is that research performance economy is more than calculation. It is also about building a culture and forging an identity [...]. Another way of putting this is that the research regime stimulates and is stimulated by desire, one powered by signifiers of excellence and relevance.

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