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The Reinvigoration of the Scottish Further Education Sector: an exploration and analysis of the recent reforms

Patrick O'Donnell, Mark Murphy and Carey Norman

ABSTRACT

In July 2012 the Scottish Government published *'Reinvigorating College Governance: the Scottish Response to The Report of the Review of Further Education Governance in Scotland'*. The Report advanced a radical new structure for the Scottish Further Education (FE) sector and the overall impact has been unparalleled, creating seismic transformations to its operating structure and governance. The newly emerging paradigm overturned previous structural and governance arrangements, rescaling the Scottish FE landscape. This paper analyses the recent policy context unfolding within the Scottish FE sector; illuminating the central driving forces and legitimising discourses behind the current restructuring, cognisant of the emergent European educational policy space. It argues that the emerging policy reforms for Scottish FE, commonly referred to as 'regionalisation', is simultaneously a continuation and departure from the governing structures set in place in the early 1990s. The paper offers productive ways of framing thinking about the regionalisation of Scottish FE. Consequently, it will be of interest to Scottish Government policy makers and those working within or in partnership with the Scottish FE sector.

INTRODUCTION

The Government Report *'Reinvigorating College Governance: the Scottish Response to The Report of the Review of Further Education Governance in Scotland'* (July, 2012) outlined a radical new structure for the Scottish Further Education (FE) sector and within a year of this announcement its overall impact has been unparalleled, creating seismic changes to the operating structure of the FE sector in Scotland. The newly emerging paradigm for FE governance - a reform process referred to as 'regionalisation' - has overturned previous structural and governance arrangements, restructuring the Scottish FE landscape into 13 regions, each with its own FE provider. The restructuring has led to the number of incorporated colleges decreasing from 37 in 2012 to 20 in 2014-15 (Audit General

Report: Scotland's Colleges, April 2015). The transition from operating as separate autonomous FE institutions to operating within a larger regional collective is still unfolding (seen here as a moving spectacle and a major cultural shift for the sector).

Unsurprisingly perhaps, anxieties over the established equilibria, habits and procedures of the old governing arrangements (developed under the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992) have been caught-up within the government's discourses underpinning the need for radical reform. Indeed, the rapid pace and radical nature of transformations to the sector has been justified by claims that the sector lacked the necessary accountability, coherence and direction to successfully engage with challenges of the future. The reforms are linked to a drive to improve efficiency and effectiveness with the need to reduce duplication being singled out. The prescribed policy solution has been a sharp break with traditional privileges through the adoption of a model aimed to give far more structural coherence. It also introduces novel levels of centralised control. The overall policy rhetoric projects a clear sense of a radical 'modernising project' for the Scottish FE sector. However, as will be discussed later, the modernising project for the Scottish FE sector can be seen as part of a larger modernising project involving Scotland's sense of national identity and place in the European context. The Scottish reforms are underpinned by the argument that a sustainable economic future for Scotland can only be achieved through collective wisdom, collective effort and shared vision. The need to foster flexible and well educated citizens to cope with rapid economic and technological development and change has been stressed repeatedly with policy rhetoric. It's a trajectory for building economic and social capital and despite the inherent complexities and structural challenges thus far, the regionalisation agenda has progressed with relative ease (Audit General Report: Scotland's Colleges, April 2015). This paper engages with the broad question: what are the main driving forces and legitimising discourses behind the current restructuring of Scottish FE sector? It is divided into two sections: the first provides an historical backdrop, charting the major developments within FE governance and management from the early 1990s onwards. This historical mapping illustrates the evolutionary nature, purpose and identity of the sector. Moreover, given that the push for radical reforms is always contingent upon a measure of critical appraisal that calls into question the value of the status quo, this historical summary will help place the current demands for radical change within a broader contextual backdrop. The second part, engages with the research question, asserting that the newly emerging policy and governance arrangements for Scottish FE, commonly known as 'regionalisation', is simultaneously a departure and a continuation from the previous major disturbance for the sector in the early 1990s - a process, commonly known as 'incorporation' - that ostensibly led to the liberation of FE colleges from the control of local authorities. Although the regionalisation of the sector opens the way to new possibilities and aspirations, as stated earlier, it inevitably breaks with existing governing traditions and privileges, thereby generating new structural and cultural arrangements that seem, at first, alien and precarious.

Over the last two decades Scottish colleges can be seen as continually on the move, re-imagining and rebranding themselves in accordance with emerging socio-

economic policies and markets and, in turn, have become increasingly complex, engaging with multiple constituencies. The plethora of prescribed policy directives designed to classify, monitor, inspect and judge educational activities has produced new roles and identities for colleges. The new identities constituted by expansive rhetoric, terms and signifiers, such as, 'transformation(al)', 'learning organisation', 'organisational agility', 'competitiveness', 'partnership', 'flexibility', 'collaboration', 'networking', 'global reach', 'enterprise and entrepreneurship'. These have all found their way into the normative space of FE and are discursively deployed to describe and legitimise organisational activities and to mobilise new changes. In considering the current disturbances, where the scale, scope and pace of change taking hold over 2012-15 has been unparalleled, it can be viewed as a response to a range of separate and intersecting factors, including global, socio-economic and political pressures and agendas.

Discourses are perceived here in terms of their social setting: they simultaneously create conditions of possibility and constraints. Further, they give meanings within a social context, i.e. they produce certain interpretative realities, hierarchical relations of power identities and communities of consent as well as dissent. In this sense we are focusing on language as a constitutive medium and the 'site where meanings are created and changed' (Taylor, 2001, p.6). Discourses (as defined here) may also seek to strengthen, simplify, resurrect and/or displace myths as well as project certainty and conviction without drawing too much attention to any counter currents that might disrupt their sense of authority and legitimacy. Discourses are located within a particular political and contingent sphere and, as such, they tend to occupy a provisional zone. As Croft (2006, p.45) observes: '*Over time, discourses decay under the weight of their own internal contradictions and external alternatives*' (12). Edwards and Usher (2008) point to the broad effects of discourse noting how they are not only synonymous with power relations but are 'dislocated' and 'dislocating'. In this sense discourses are never objective, impartial translations of reality; rather they are ideological constructions sealed against countervailing trends and alternative hypotheses. Edwards and Usher (2008, p.159) note:

Discourses are about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social relationships, they constitute both subjectivity and power relations [...] thus, discourses construct certain possibilities for thought. They order and combine words in particular ways and exclude or displace other combinations.

Ball (2013, p.7) drawing on earlier writers (Gee *et al.*, 1996), notes how: 'Discourses produce social positions from which people are invited (summoned) to speak, listen, act read, work, think, feel, behave and value.' Arnott and Ozga (2010a, p.339) note: 'Policy actors use discourse to foreground certain key ideas and thus restrict or reduce the significance of other competing ways of seeing or thinking about policy issues.' Similarly, Thompson, (2009, p. 38) highlights how policy discourse: 'structures our understanding and governs the paths of action which appear to be open to us.' Consequently, to gain an appreciation of how these reforms have been informed by and inscribed within particular political,

social and economic discourses it is important to investigate and map the evolution of the recent educational reviews, consultations and policy documents unfolding in very recent times. The dominant discourses circulating here will illuminate the sorts of realities that are being constructed about the contemporary Scottish FE context and its capacity to meet future socio-economic challenges.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological and conceptual framework employed in this study is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach was adopted because policy trajectory surrounding regionalisation has become a complex multilayered process that is continually developing and responding to a range of internally and externally driven political, social, economic changes and pressures. It is argued that because of the radical nature of the cultural and structural changes currently unfolding within the Scottish FE sector, multiple discourses will be circulating (implicitly and explicitly) within policy documents and rhetoric and that applying a version of CDA would reveal important insights into how the sector has been portrayed, bringing into play the dominant driving forces behind the demand for radical restructuring of the sector. The analysis will also say something about the newly emerging power relations and communities of practice forming and as such, the study contributes to the wider debates on the future role and identity of the sector, locating it within a web of significance - of agency, connections and constraints.

Under Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) language as seen as a constitutive medium and the 'site where meanings are created and changed' (Taylor, 2001, p. 6). This perspective views language not as a 'neutral information-carrying vehicle' but as 'a fluid shifting medium' in which 'meaning is created and contested' by the language users who are always situated within it and striving to make their own social and cultural positioning and understandings (ibid, p.6). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) stresses the interpretative nature of knowledge and the multiplicities of discourses within data, in this instance text. As an interpretative model, the texts will be analysed to illuminate the symbolism of the language used - the discourse - and the values and attitudes that underpin it.

The study will examine a number of key policy texts including: *The Report of the Review of Further Education Governance in Scotland*, (Scottish Government, January 2012) commonly known as the Griggs Review and the corresponding response document *Reinvigorating College Governance: the Scottish Response to the Report of the Review of Further Education Governance in Scotland*, (Scottish Government, 2012). Other related texts considered include the two consultation documents: *Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education* (Scottish Government, 2011a) and *Regionalisation: Proposals for Implementing Putting Learners at the Centre* (Scottish Government, 2011b). This study will focus on written texts, though cognisance of action that preceded and resulted from the texts will undoubtedly provide a context, lens or framing reference from which the texts will be interpreted.

As well as scrutinising key policy texts the study also involved semi-structured taped interviews with two high profile agents working in/for the Scottish Government and embedded within education reforms in Scotland. At the time of interview (2013) these agents were heavily involved with the post-16 education

policy formation and were members of a number of key working groups involved with the restructuring of the Scottish FE sector. The interviews focused on the perceived need and nature of the reforms as well as exploring issues surrounding the future identity and role of Scottish FE. A further semi-structured taped interview was conducted with a key agent operating at the interface between policy formation and dissemination. The interviews were conducted in accordance with recognised ethical protocols. The recipients were given ethical statements with full details of the purpose of the study including data collection and storage. Interview respondents received a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview. The actual interview took approximately 30-40 minutes and respondents were also given the opportunity to check interview transcripts for accuracy. The storage of all interview data was encrypted/password protected and the confidentiality and anonymity of all respondents respected. Access to all interview files was restricted to the authors of the paper. The interview data will not be archived for future secondary studies/research and will be destroyed two years after the final paper has been written up and published.

THE (LAST) GREAT TRANSFORMATION: FURTHER EDUCATION AND INCORPORATION

How does the policy goal of regionalisation depart from the previous FE paradigm? To grasp the magnitude of regionalisation, it is perhaps fruitful to place it against some of the main cultural and structural changes ushered in by the last major shakeup of the sector – namely the changes that unfolded under the 1992 *Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act*. It is important to note that the 1990s were increasingly characterised by the dominance of neo-liberalism. Central elements of this neo-liberal ideology constituted an unshakeable faith in the benefits of the free market, competition and individual freedom from what was considered to be overbearing state interference. ‘Markets’ and ‘choice’ became fashionable expressions in the rhetoric of the neo-liberal ideology. These expressions were accompanied by the implicit claim that more choice meant improvements in quality and standards.

Under the 1992 Act, the Scottish Office took overall responsibility for and control over colleges from local authorities. This process, known as ‘incorporation’, ended a period of almost five decades of local authority control resulting in individual college’s becoming self-governing institutions responsible for managing their own affairs, from April 1993. The post-incorporation arrangements created a national system of funding whereby colleges had to compete with each other for funding, effectively ushering in a prolonged period of marketisation. Under the aegis of incorporation, colleges were said to be set free, liberated from the suffocating constraints of local authority – a relationship that was seen to stifle innovation in the FE sector – and become independent corporate bodies with considerable freedoms (Crossely and Elliott, 1997). New funding arrangements designed to both reward and punish institutions according to their ability to meet certain pre-defined performance criteria were also established, meaning that in many cases colleges confronted each other in a quasi-market where they were required to do more with less resources (Deem and Brehony, 2000). During the post-

incorporation years, colleges' core mission was hence reconceptualised in terms of the market ethos, with strategic planning foregrounded. Colleges' appointed their own Board of Governors and new senior management positions were created to govern – human resources management, estate management and accounting functions (Gallacher, 2006).

By the late 1990s onwards the political rhetoric on education started to change with the election of New Labour in 1997 and its Third Way politics. While Neo-Liberalism rested on a belief in the benefits of the free market, competition, individual freedom and, significantly, a minimal role for state intervention, 'Third Wayism' was more interested in creating conditions where equity and social justice were re-invigorated and combined with competitiveness and market policies (Doyle, 2003). However, the extent to which 'Third Way politics' departed from the neo-liberal policies of the early to mid-1990s is much debated. As Ball (2007, p. 21) notes there have been *'both significant continuities and decisive ruptures between neo-liberalism [...] and the Third Way'*. What is clear is that New Labour policy reflected the importance of the post compulsory sector contributing to Britain's competitive edge on the global market by producing and disseminating economically productive knowledge. Also from the late 1990s the overarching mission and rhetoric of lifelong learning policy started to form part of the overall legitimising discourse of the requirement for the sector to expand learning opportunities and be more accessible to non-traditional learners, becoming more flexible in terms of developing qualification frameworks that meet the needs of individual learners, employers and industry (Field, 2006). Significantly, there was a renewed emphasis on the need for post compulsory education to become even more entrepreneurial by engaging in collaborative ventures with other agencies. Indeed, under New-Labour Third Way Politics, partnership became a powerful discourse in mobilising change. The dynamics of entrepreneurialism, partnership, collaboration and competition co-existed within the post-compulsory education in a rather convoluted, paradoxical and open textured way. Consequently, diverse contexts of practice flourished, making it increasingly challenging to find a consensus on the role and identity of the FE sector.

Unsurprisingly, as the language of business penetrated more firmly into the lexicon of the FE sector, more hard edge strategic management frameworks took root. Throughout the literature on FE (and HE) the term 'new managerialism' has been widely used (Holloway, 1999; Elliott, 1996; Randle and Brady, 2000) to describe the structural, organisational and managerial changes that have taken place in the post-incorporation era. New managerialism is said to have forcefully embraced private sector style practices by demanding from institutions greater accountability both in their use of public funds and quality assessment. Underpinning this new managerialism are assumptions that 'good management' will deliver the so-called three 'E's of economy, efficiency and effectiveness in public services, guaranteeing value for taxpayers' money and eliminating waste (Randle and Brady, 2000). Of course, strategic outcomes and cultural dynamics don't emerge from a vacuum. Rather, they emerge from a clash of organisational vested interests, personal agendas and ambitions and, not least, the strength and utilisation of power wielded by individuals and groups. Therefore, new managerialism should not be seen as a strict rigid doctrine of ideas and processes

but as subject to modification over time, space and institutional context. Indeed, despite new managerialism's commitment to cut down on bureaucracy, it has, paradoxically, introduced new layers of bureaucracy in the form of an increased emphasis on target setting, audit performance procedures and ever evolving surveillance and accountability (see Elliott, 1996; Randle and Brady, 2000; Clow, 2001; Gleeson *et al.*, 2005; Gleeson and James, 2007; Simmons, 2008).

Overall, the policy directives of incorporation demanded colleges' grow through the development of curricula that could shape and meet the needs of the local communities (Leech, 2000). This was characterised by 'a punishing drive towards efficiency, through incentivising individual institutions to compete for Government funding [...]' (Gallacher, 2003; cited in Lowe and Gayle, 2010, p. 2) and central funding being awarded on 'above average growth in levels of student activity' with those who 'achieved average or below average growth' having their budgets cut and imposed 'efficiency gains' (McTavish, 2003; cited in Lowe and Gayle, 2010, p. 2). This led to fierce competition between colleges to compete in a market-driven economy with a Darwinian survival of the fittest mentality and exemplifies the core assumptions of neo-liberalism - individual and market competition and self-interest fostering 'free enterprise' (Briggs, 2005, p.26).

FROM INCORPORATION TO REGIONALISATION: GRIGGS REVIEW

In January 2012, Professor Griggs (Review chair) submitted his 113 page Report: '*The Report of the Review of Further Education Governance in Scotland*,' (known within the Scottish context as the Griggs Review) to the Scottish Government. The review's remit was twofold. Firstly, to consider whether current institutional governance arrangements in the college sector in Scotland deliver an appropriate level of democratic accountability; and secondly, to examine the structure of college governance and make recommendations for sector wide change that would support the role of colleges in economic and social development. The Report delivered across-the-board evaluation of the governance of the Scottish FE sector and incorporated the central messages articulated in the consultation documents '*Putting Learners At The Centre: Delivering our Ambitions For Post-16 Education*, (Scottish Government, September 2011a) and '*Regionalisation: proposals for implementing 'Putting Learners at the Centre'*' (Scottish Government, November, 2011b). Demands for radical institutional reform inevitability involve a level of disappointment towards the status quo. To gain legitimacy, the regionalisation agenda instinctively seeks to call into question the established equilibria, habits, values, behaviour patterns and procedures of FE governance and management set in train in the 1990s. As Ball (2013, p.63) notes when discussing new policy reforms: 'Policy is, by definition, restless and future orientated and often works rhetorically by devaluing the present and making it ugly, abhorrent and unendurable'. Unsurprisingly perhaps, within the policy discourse outlining the new reforms for Scottish FE we can detect explicit claims that the old governance order was outdated and below expectations in terms of sector accountability and coherence. The Review of FE governance identified that the 'individualisation of Colleges' had created 'inequalities and differences across Scotland' that are 'haphazard and not

controlled or managed in any way' (Scottish Government, 2012a, p. 8-19). The Report also highlighted how the review team found the Scottish FE sector 'not fit for purpose, and in need of fundamental reform. As Griggs states (ibid, p.60): 'Given the discontinuity and disharmony in the sector across many issues we believe that this report and its recommendations give a solid and consistent base that can form the foundation on which other things can and will evolve'

In July 2012 the Government published its response to the Griggs Review in a document called *'Reinvigorating College Governance: the Scottish Government Response to The Report of the Review of Further Education Governance in Scotland'*. The signifier 'reinvigorating', evoking the idea that FE governance set in place almost two decades ago - under neo-liberal thinking - is in need of an injection of dynamism to meet the perceived challenges ahead. The Report (ibid, p.1) is explicit in its position: 'current governance arrangements are fundamentally flawed because they lack public accountability'.

The call for radical reform to the Scottish FE sector coincided with reports of poor governance and mismanagement. The unfolding revelations surrounding the governance at Adam Smith College, where the Scottish Funding Council was forced to intervene has been the most recent, and perhaps the most serious case of dysfunctional governance activities. The investigation report informed a Scottish Government news release stating:

The report draws Parliament's attention to significant failures in corporate governance and financial stewardship at the college [...]. In particular, the college has had to repay £5.5 million of European Union (EU) grants, and has provided for up to a further £1.2 million in potential repayments of other grants. (Auditor General's report on Adam Smith College 2011/12 accounts, 17 October 2013, p. 2).

Thus, against this lingering negative press coverage the government policy rhetoric for the need to ensure 'democratic accountability' within the FE sector would have resonated strongly within the public domain, highlighting the sense of urgency for radical change and thus unlikely to attract too much censure from those outside the sector.

NEW DIRECTION: ENACTING THE REGIONALISATION AGENDA

The themes and overall policy trajectory outlined in the Scottish Government's response document are now very familiar to the FE sector and the regionalisation agenda is well underway. The underpinning logic is clear: regionalisation demands planning, collaboration and partnerships rather than competition between institutions. Developing regional college provision was said to reduce duplication and increase efficiency through larger and more networked colleges. FE provision would be delivered more effectively at a regional level through partnerships between other educational providers – schools and universities – local employers and other agencies and stakeholder including Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and Government. Under the regionalisation hegemony the Scottish FE landscape has been radically changed, divided up into 13 regions (not 12 as first recommended). The regionalisation template has seen existing incorporated colleges reformed into two types: 'regional colleges' representing a merger of existing FE colleges and located within what is referred to as 'single-college

regions', and 'assigned colleges' representing two or more colleges collaborating together to provide FE provision within 'multi-college' regions. Each region has an overarching single body the Further Education Regional Board (FERB) that is the focal point of engagement with FE regional partners and performs a number of activities including: planning FE provision strategically across the region; entering into the 'regional outcome agreement' with the Scottish Funding Council; deciding how funding should be allocated and how efficiencies should be secured. Each FERB would have a chair who would be appointed by and report to Government as well as negotiate with the SFC. Broadly speaking, the outcome agreements, which have now moved towards a three year cycle, contain a number of commitments that seek to reflect both national priority areas while addressing specific regional needs. This approach – framed across both micro and macro measurable objectives - is intended to dissolve the multi-faceted nature of the sector which has developed over the last two decades, while at the same time achieve more meaningful and intimate relationships between colleges and key stakeholders in advancing a range of imperatives which include: increased accountability and confidence in the allocation of resources, ensuring that resources are concentrated where there is the greatest need; continuous improvements to maximise college impact on the learner, the employer and the economy (Scottish Funding Council, 2014).

To keep the momentum going in terms of ensuring smooth structural and cultural transitions each region has been allocated an outcome agreement manager (employed by and appointed by the SFC) who are tasked with co-ordinating linkages with all policy areas, ensuring all data and priority areas are accurately reflected within the outcome agreements. In ethnographical terms the outcome agreement managers are firmly embedded within their allocated region, perceived as sense seekers and having the authority to interpret policy imperatives for their regional board. On a wider horizon they will work collectively with others, including Education Scotland and the College Development Network, to support development and disseminate good practice. Thus, we have a departure from the competitive and sometimes atomistic educational arrangements that characterised FE under incorporation and witness an educational trend towards more universalistic and collective orientations. College principals and their respective boards will no longer operate as single autonomous entities with the power to devise their own strategic plans but will have to negotiate with their respective regional board. Consequently, the fundamental rupture is that the locus of power has shifted from college principals to the Scottish Government, via the FERBs.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, the transformations stemming from regionalisation are seen to create a more manageable and more responsive sector. As one senior policy advisor interviewed for this study said: 'when it comes to dealing with the sector, working in a room with 13 regional leads will be much easier than working with 40 plus college principals.' From this conceptual horizon there seems to be a concern, imagined or otherwise, that under the old governance and leadership arrangements sector wide planning and negotiations on policy issues could become too fragmented, denigrating into a polyvocal - cacophony of competing voices - with no one voice emerging to speak for, or represent, the sector.

It is important to note that the mergers have clearly introduced new challenges as well as reductions in human resources. As a recent Auditor General Report (2015) highlights:

Recent changes have made it more challenging for colleges to plan and forecast their longer-term financial position. However, colleges need to develop longer-term financial planning to ensure they consider, and plan for, the future needs of their region. The mergers and funding reductions have led to reductions in expenditure, mainly in recurring staff costs. Staff numbers decreased by 9.3 per cent between 2011-12 and 2013-14. The reductions in staff costs were delivered mainly through voluntary severances (Auditor General Report on Scotland's Colleges, April 2015, p.6, par 7).

Within the proposed reforms for FE there have been considerable efforts to reduce the prospect of early mission slip. However, the rapid pace and radical nature of transformations to the sector has resulted in certain omissions with reference to having in place transparent and robust measuring technologies to assess wider policy goals. As the Auditor General Report (*ibid*) notes:

The Scottish Government identified that mergers would deliver £50 million of efficiency savings each year from 2015-16, along with other benefits, such as reduced duplication and better engagement with employers. While mergers have contributed to significant efficiency savings, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) have not specified how they will measure some of the expected wider benefits. This makes it difficult to assess whether the reform programme is achieving all of its aims. (Auditor General Report on Scotland's Colleges, April 2015, p.5, par 2).

Recognising Ball's (2013, p.35) contention that: 'Most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit-and-miss affairs that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence [...],' the lack of clarity on exactly what assessment technologies will be employed to measure the achievement of policy goals by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) is somewhat paradoxical. More so, in this instance, against the backdrop of sector reforms that have been justified, in part, on the need for greater transparency and more robust forms of democratic accountability. The speed of change, unformed processes and poorly delineated markers of success illustrates the potency of the ideological underpinning for the reforms, in Scotland.

EUROPEAN EDUCATION POLICY SPACE AND FE REFORMS

How do these educational reforms in Scotland map to the wider context? The advancement of global economic forces has clearly ushered in a new era of heightened awareness of the social and economic importance of education. Globalisation foregrounds education in distinctive ways that seek to align education to the rapid spread of technologies and knowledge flows linked to the economic competitiveness of nations within the global economy (Ozga and Lingard 2007). Globalisation is sometimes seen as a predominantly economic process, presented as the ongoing integration of national economies into the international economy whereby trade, manufacture, foreign investment and capital flows are increasingly interwoven. However, globalisation is also recognised as

being embroiled within a combination of technological, political, social and cultural as well as economic factors. It can be perceived as a set of discursive processes and practices, a way of understanding and responding to rapid change (Edwards and Usher, 2008, p.7). In considering these social and technological dynamics, Malpas (2005) argues that as we move into the twenty-first century, the opportunities open to people are multiplying as new ideas, technologies and fashions appear at ever-increasing rates. Traditions, values and associated forms of social interaction are transformed, realigned and, in some cases, diluted beyond recognition as the flux of communication technologies transcends sovereign nation states and erodes many of their traditional powers and reconfiguring and reshaping their role. What is clear is that the intricate process of globalisation are exerting both centripetal and centrifugal forces on the world, producing various degrees of uniformity and diversity on the economic, political, cultural and social. As a consequence, policy discourses and policy formation are increasingly framed within the overarching architecture of globalisation (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). Generally speaking, such processes and pressures are depicted in the literature as a shift from Westphalian to post-Westphalian era where global forces surpass the frontiers of borders, creating increasing interdependence between nation states (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010).

This global architecture includes a range of authoritative supranational agents and bodies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, (UNESCO) World Bank, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, (OECD) World Trade Organisation and regional organisations such as the European Union (EU). They are part of what is commonly referred to as the emergent 'global educational policy field', or in the context of Europe a 'European education policy space' (Ozga and Lingard, 2007 and Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). Such organisations help create a discursive space where policy networks and policy communities' form, where policy agendas, discourses, ideas and concepts flow, gain legitimacy and credibility and diffuse outwards (Grek, 2013, Ball, 2013, Robertson, 2010, Arnott and Ozga, 2010a, 2010b). In other words, these organisations have been an important catalyst in the shaping and diffusion of educational ideologies and practices within and among nation states.

After the European Union in Maastricht (Feb, 1992) Europe is no longer conceptualised as a geographical entity or region, but also as a space within which the enactment of new commitments, loyalties and ideas unfold. The post-Maastricht Treaty era has witnessed the increasing prominence of the European education policy space in terms of governing education policy within the emerging world markets in education services and the shifting global labour and economic markets (Lawn and Lingard, 2002). It has helped produce important reference points and benchmarking for our contemporary thinking on education, creating what many refers to as 'instruments of governance' (Ball, 2013 and Grek, 2013). In translating policy imperatives into realities the European educational policy field operates on what is called an open method of cooperation (OPC) which rests on mechanism and tools such as guidelines and indicators benchmarking to measure best practice and sharing best practice. It is underpinned by what is termed as 'soft law' where no effective executive authority or official sanction exists. Instead a form of peer pressure and naming and shaming of poor performance is used to

mobilise positive action to secure advantage and collective purpose. Thus, in contemporary times education policymakers within their own nation state are increasingly networked with policymakers in agencies outside the state (Rizvi and Lingard 2010 and Ball, 2013) and within the context of the European education policy space we are witnessing what Ball (2013, p.5) refers to as: 'processes of policy harmonisation, convergence, transfer and borrowing that are confronted by and enter into diverse local political and cultural histories.' All this is taking place against a backdrop trend where individual nation states are being further broken down into sub-regions.

After the election of the Scottish National Party (SNP) government (May 2007) Europe became an important reference source for Scotland's modernising project with the result that education policy within Scotland has been increasingly framed by a range of discourses, agendas and imperatives found within European educational policy space (Grek, 2013, Arnott and Ozga 2010a, 2010b). Aspirations for an independent Scotland are embroiled with this position, as Grek (2013, p.239) states: [...] Scottish policy actors seem to be much more aware of and at home with developments in the European Education Policy space than their English counterparts (Grek and Ozga, 2010) and that Europe offers Scotland a resource for the recognition of its difference from the larger, more powerful and more visible UK system of England.' This outward referencing also incorporates a positioning of Scotland in relation to Nordic countries such as Norway Denmark and Finland (Arnott and Ozga, 2010a). Naturally, within the context of the SNP government's quest for an independent Scotland, these efforts of outward referencing and positioning Scotland in relation to Nordic countries rather than the rest of the UK is a rational approach in the strategy to construct Scotland as a distinctive nation, having the full capacity to represent the economic and cultural interests of a national group.

Historically, Scottish education system, its structure, curriculum and underpinning values, has been central in shaping and sustaining Scotland's sense of identity and national consciousness (Arnott and Ozga, 2010a). Therefore the potential of education in helping the SNP government translate its vision of nationalism, political self-determination and independence into a political programme for action should not be underplayed, as (Grek 2013, p.1047) observes 'The concept of Europe is not only presented in the education policy narratives of stakeholders in Scotland but that, in fact, it is continually and strategically utilised as part of the current government's aspirations to independence. [...] Scottish policy makers see Europe as offering a fruitful policy space not only for learning but for achieving recognitions and international acclaim, often capitalising on the English retreat and disinterest in Europe as a point of reference.'

It is argued here that the nature and scope of radical reforms for Scottish FE must be contemplated against this wider backdrop. The regionalisation agenda has been shaped by ideas found within the European education policy space yet cognisant of Scotland's education principles and history. Within EU policy field the trend of institutional mergers on a regional basis is viewed with optimism. For example, a review of the Scottish vocational education and training by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD *Review of*

Vocational Education and Training: skills Beyond School, Commentary on Scotland, Dec 2013) highlighted how reforms advocating regional mergers between institutions delivering vocational education and training were progressive trends that enhanced vocational education in terms of governance, skills flexibility and sustainable economic growth. The OECD review (ibid) discussed a number of EU countries - Ireland, Finland, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands - benefiting from such mergers of individual vocational institutions on a regional basis and recognised the newly emerging Scottish FE reforms (regionalisation agenda) as a positive step towards enhancing the vocational educational sector. Discussing the merger of 98 vocationally-orientated institutions into 26 state colleges in Norway, the OECD review (ibid, p.19) gives an indication of the potential benefits: 'The mergers, which took place in 1994, have in many ways proved to be a successful reform. The colleges now have more competent administration and professional leadership, and they have become far more visible and have acquired a higher status.'

Thus, the new FE arrangement for Scotland can be seen to underscore the sub-national regionalisation approach promoted by the EU as an effective model for enhancing social and economic development at a local level through co-ordinated action within and between institutions and education sectors. Moreover, the underpinning notions of 'democratic accountability' and 'networked forms of governance' found within the Griggs Report can be traced to the European educational policy space. In terms of longer-term strategies, there is a case to argue that as the Scottish FE sector (under regionalisation) becomes a more unified and co-ordinated field of action then it should on a better footing for attracting European funding - Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Social Fund (ESF). The salient point to make here is that the new reforms for FE reflect, respond to and reinforce many of the imperatives and agendas projected within the European policy space. Perhaps the point of departure with the European policy space is that Scotland is a small nation and has moved towards the co-construction of a 'shared national policy narrative' between educational researchers and the policy makers and government (Grek 2011, p.239). Scale is certainly a factor i.e. the small nation enabling closer proximity to policy makers (James 2011) but it is also as a consequence of having a government that is sharply aware of its history and has a strong sense of national identity.

EMERGING DISCOURSES FROM THE NEW REFORMS

The narratives unfolding within the policy discourses advancing the regionalisation agenda are both retrospective and progressive, creating continuities and decisive ruptures with the past. As Edwards and Usher (2008) suggest, to introduce change, policy makers must be in a position of understanding (rhetorically at least) about existing weaknesses and how best to introduce solutions. As discussed elsewhere, the regionalisation rhetoric and discourse evokes the notion that the old order – the structure, culture of FE governance - is in need of an injection of dynamism to meet the perceived challenges ahead. There is a strong case to argue that the Griggs Report and the government's response document(s) and statements have created a pathologising effect; FE colleges are depicted as 'ailing'

and in need of urgent treatment. Such tactics are not uncommon and, indeed, the official discourse leading up to incorporation positioned FE in the 1980s as in need of radical reform – the policy of incorporation was cast as an act of emancipation, freeing colleges from local authority control and outdated suffocating practices. Within the regionalisation agenda there is an undeniable sense of a ‘modernising project’ unfolding, with the demand for better alignment, accountability, fairness and transparency surfacing to occupy a dominant position within the discourse framing discussions on the restructuring of the governance of the sector. We are informed that radical structural changes are vital if the FE sector is to successfully engage with the perceived challenges of moving to the new vision set out in ‘Putting Learners at the Centre’ and building economic and social capital.

Naturally, there are other drivers and imperatives at play here. Within the policy discourse, the search for better accountability, fairness and transparency are accompanied by a stress on ‘partnership’, ‘efficiency’, ‘resourcefulness’ and ‘effectiveness’, with the latter being defined as the need for the sector to be more responsive to the emerging economic and social-cultural transformation (delineated in the recently published policy documents and reports). Human capital and social capital formation is certainly intimately embroiled, with policy discourses enacting a range of learner subjectivities: ‘responsible citizens’ ‘flexible workers’, ‘self-actuated and self-directed lifelong learners able to make connections between their own learning and its broader social, economic and global context. Thus, the current policy reforms have found the legitimacy to jettison old structural arrangements and radically reconfigure the boundaries by discursively employing a range of familiar policy imperatives and drivers to the FE sector. Policy steering has also been achieved by a number of recognisable levers to mobilise change, such as the allocation of funds on a sanction and reward basis and associated performativity scripts. In broad terms then, it’s a discourse of economic sustainability and advancement, mixed with ethical undertones of fairness and egalitarianism, discursively employed to legitimise deep-rooted structural changes to the sector and in many instances underscore and buttress the trajectory of changes already set in train over the last two decades. Indeed, the policy rhetoric on the role for post-16 education in combating poverty, social exclusion through the creation of new pathways for educational success and creating engaged, informed and responsible citizens - clearly draws the ethical discourse underpinning social capital theory advanced by New Labour ‘Third Wayism’.

Notions of partnerships and collaboration together with narratives on education broadly framed within human capital theory and social capital theory have found considerable saliency within the current reconfiguration of post-16 education. This is not new, as alluded to earlier, partnerships became an important feature in New Labour’s Third-Way Political rhetoric and practice and were able to grow in conjunction with the reorganisation of traditional relationships and boundaries between public services, and socio-economic fields (Cardini, 2006, Billet, *et al.*, 2007 and Seddon, *et al.*, 2007). The necessity for this increased emphasis on partnership is apparent; the restructuring of the sector involves the creation of new networks as well as the enforcement of new sources of power and legitimacy. Under the regionalisation template, universities, colleges, schools and other

stakeholders will have a new synergy, cast in the role of 'interdependence delivery partners', operating within set geographical locations - what Coffield. *et al.*, (2007, p.735) refers to as 'local ecologies'. Here within this partnership and collaboration notion we can detect underlying mix of humanist and communitarian discourses at play, one emphasising co-operative practices between educational organisations and rejecting what it perceives as the corrosive effects of working in isolation and in competition where the self-interest of individual leaders can dominate. Within the political sphere, however, 'partnership' is defined in a rather nebulous way, loosely seen within the realm of education as 'community of actors, stakeholders and organisations', blissfully striding towards achieving shared goals and common purpose (Cardini, 2006 and Seddon, *et al.*, 2007). As Cardini (2006, p.396) suggests: '[...] partnerships function as a magic concept; a concept that because of its links with other notions such as 'networks', 'cooperation' and 'trust', sounds modern, neutral, pragmatic and positive.'

As stated elsewhere, discourses are ideological constructions sealed against countervailing trends and alternative hypotheses (Edwards and Usher, 2008), or as Arnott and Ozga (2010a, p.339) note: 'Discourse, in effect, creates and recreates that world by eliminating some possibilities and focusing on others.' This foregrounding and restricting strategy has been picked up by Cardini (*ibid*) who argues that within the political discourse advocating partnerships and collaboration (often conflated) there resides a somewhat naïve assumption that individuals within partnerships arrangements meet as equals in a collaborative democratic decision making process.

In accepting Seddon *et al.*, (2007) and Cardini (2006) analyses, it is inevitable that partnerships can at times be characterised as a process of struggle for dominance among differing groups competing over the legitimisation of values and maps of meaning. Naturally, in the case of an organisational partnership arrangement, members cannot be perceived as mere automatons or 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1979, p.138), but agents within their own ideological, social and economic frameworks. As Fay (1996: 67) argues: 'Agency is a relative trait [...] some people are more 'agential' than others by virtue of their place in the social order, their social aptitudes, their disposition.' Thus, within the newly evolving FE partnerships created through regionalisation, sedimentations of previous structures and values, together with biographical and political differences amongst the main actors are likely to become crucial dynamics determining the sustainability for both the partner and partnership. When we think of the potential mechanisms able to deliver a broad synchronisation of the FE sector, the partnership arrangements and associated dialectical engagement will be amongst the most compelling.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that the newly emerging policy and governance arrangements for Scottish FE exhibits traits of both rupture and continuity with the previous major disturbance for the sector in the early 1990s. The FE regionalisation agenda, with its move towards a more networked form of governance, has radically reconfigured the sector, creating new unifying structures that seek to convey a new sense of purpose and direction for the sector. It is a broad endeavour at synchronisation

and perhaps, over time, a new normative space will unfold in which a core identity of FE can be forged. Put simply, the regionalisation agenda seeks to put the future operation and behaviour of the FE sector on a more predictable path.

Regionalisation seeks to infuse new levels of coherence and unity. This unity involves constructing new geographical boundaries for the sector and setting up the Regional Boards to govern. Constructing new geographical boundaries or Coffield *et al's.*, (2007) 'local ecologies' has taken place through the combined approaches of new levels of centralised control and accountability systems including newly evolving performativity scripts in the form of national and local outcome agreements. Interestingly, the newly emerging regionalisation agenda is cloaked in the familiar rhetoric of economic imperatives that was used to promote incorporation. Regionalisation transcends beyond the aims of coherence and unity; it also equates to rationalisation, saving in expenditure, reducing duplication and eliminating those elements that do not contribute effectively to the overarching vision and mission(s).

Under the new reforms the lash of competition between colleges has dissipated (for now) but the drive for better delivery of education provision under increasing financial constraints is ever present, bringing familiar challenges and associated anxieties. What is emerging here is a new architecture of governance and although it is radical and progressive in that it rescales the sector and overturns traditional power relations, at a deeper structural level and in terms of continuity with the past, it is a new structure that still embraces a concern with prudent fiscal control. Consequently, levels of surveillance, guidance and control loom large in the 'new order'. It is here we can witness familiar elements of neo-liberal thinking.

One intriguing aspect of the new structure is the way it brings together a multiplicity of actors and scales of managerialism within one realm. No doubt novel forms of conflict and tensions will materialise, especially where the pursuit of progress may depend upon a paradoxical intertwining of compulsion and consent by means of the allocation of funds on a sanction and reward basis. In this sense, there is no difference between regionalisation and incorporation in terms of financial control as the prime means to manipulate behaviours. What is different is that the driver now is towards partnership and collaboration rather than individualisation and competition. Within this discourse, the collective identity construct of regionalisation is towards homogeneity and this sits starkly contrasted to the heterogeneity of the FE sector created under incorporation.

As we write, each of the 13 FE regions are (re)forming new sensibilities that will help shape a new operational habitus; one that embeds responsiveness and flexibility, resourcefulness and efficiency in meeting local, national and global imperatives and pressures. In terms of achieving new levels of quality, vitality and coherence FE colleges are already jettisoning old mind-sets and anchoring new approaches to their cultural practices. That said, it is still too early to probe the external and internal interface of activities unfolding and proffer comprehensive analysis of the likely domains of contentions and episodes of inconsistencies and hesitancy related to policy interpretation and enactment. What we can say is that the intersubjectivity between regional chairs, outcome regional managers and regional board members will play a decisive role in these early stages and beyond.

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