



The nature of leadership

# Bureaucracy & Leadership

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# Research Summaries Notices

## **Research Summaries**

The documents in this series are a summary of academic working papers or prepublication/preprint articles, which may subsequently appear (part or whole) in peer reviewed journals and books. In most cases they are draft documents, the purpose of which is to foster discussion and debate, prior to publication elsewhere whilst ideas are still fresh. A copy of the full working paper is available upon request.

Further information about the research programme and other papers in this series can also be found at the following websites:

<http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/cel/> or <http://www.centreforexcellence.org.uk>

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# Introduction

This research summary paper considers the issue of bureaucracy in Further Education (FE). Bureaucracy appears a significant managerial burden in Further Education. While this may have always been the case, current concerns date from the 1992 the Further and Higher Education Act and 'Incorporation', and the change in accountabilities that accompanied the delegation of financial and managerial control to college governing bodies. The often adversarial relationship which developed between providers in the sector and their regulatory and funding bodies contributed to the sense of 'audit culture' felt by those at college level. The result was a call for a reduction in the administrative burden imposed upon college staff, and the formation of the Bureaucracy Task Force with the remit of investigating how this might be achieved. The BTF arranged its recommendations under the following three headings:

- Culture and Relationships. This covered the need to build greater transparency at national and local levels, reduce the bidding culture, develop mechanisms for limiting the introduction of new reporting demands (primarily through the work of the Bureaucracy Review Group), and to develop and apply the principle of intervention in inverse proportion to success.
- The Planning and Funding of Provision. This envisaged the articulation of a new planning process in the context of a lighter regulatory framework. Fundamental simplification of the funding methodology, including fewer funding streams and the introduction of plan-led funding, would underpin the new process.
- Reducing the Data Collection Burden. Simplifying data collection, making more effective use of data gathered, implementing materiality thresholds and sharing more data electronically were all proposed as contributing to the containment/reduction of the administrative burden imposed upon colleges.

While there have been positive changes in both funding and regulation, data from our study suggests that little has changed on the ground since December 2003, when Sir George Sweeney was quoted (TES, 2003) as saying:

*'...the perception in the field, in the colleges or in the local LSC, is that bureaucracy has not greatly diminished and for some there is a sense of things having got worse rather than better ... It is clear that the cultural transformation recommended by the bureaucracy task force is a long way from being achieved.'* (TES, 7th November 2003)

It is with the perceptions in the field, with the day-to-day workload – and the understanding of the purpose and effectiveness of the work undertaken – of lecturers and managers in the FE sector, that this paper is concerned.

Our interest in bureaucracy emerged from a larger study of leadership in Further Education. One emerging concern has been with the changing burden of accountability post-incorporation and the amount of bureaucracy that seems to have accompanied it. Given the primary emphasis of the research on understanding the everyday, practical accomplishment of leadership, the issue of bureaucracy within the sector emerged as a general and abiding concern.

# The View from the Trenches: Carrying the Day-To-Day Burden of Bureaucracy

The ethnographic data gathered through shadowing FE principals and their senior management teams has revealed the considerable impact of the prevailing 'audit culture' on the practices and activities that characterise leadership work. A number of themes may be drawn from the data which illustrate this 'view from the trenches' in the war against bureaucracy.

## **THEME 1: THE PERSISTENCE OF AN AUDIT CULTURE**

The prevalence of an 'audit culture', involving considerable time and effort being devoted to making the work of the college accountable rather than to the delivery of 'first order', student-focused outcomes, is clear in the fieldwork observations we have made. This reflects the increasing need to perform a new kind of accountability based around the twin goals of economic efficiency and good practice. The following fieldnote extracts, relating to one college's bid for Premium Funding, illustrate both the construction and performance element of the audit process, and the time-consuming nature of the underlying work practices.

**Fieldnote extract 1:** *SMT meeting reviews funding and planning paper prepared for the LSC – no clear guidelines as to what they want, so huge variety in what each area has provided. Steve (Principal) briefs people on how to use the draft documents at tomorrow's meeting with the LSC: use it as a prompt but don't hand it out. Need to know more about what they want in order to prepare a document for them. Steve coaches people in how to approach the meeting and how to handle questions, so they are all 'telling the same story'.*

**Fieldnote extract 2:** *Peter (Director of Finance) gives other members of the SMT a clear walk-through of the financial data, and their implications for meeting LSC funding criteria. Steve: "If it's 10 more IT students we need another teacher, if it's 10 more modern languages then its straight profit."*

**Fieldnote extract 3:** Steve works through the numbers, checking them on a calculator – likes to be one step ahead in terms of clarity - then rehearses the argument in terms of implications for funding programme. ... as people leave Steve says, "A useful meeting. For a set piece like this, it's important to be prepared. I feel I know where we are now and we all know what to say. We did this with Ofsted."

The documents produced to meet an external audit requirement, and the accounts that underpin them, represent 'gambits of compliance'. Steve and his colleagues know what provision they want to make for students within the college, and use the audit framework imposed by their funding body as a vehicle for justifying the required resources. The requirements of external accountability and the performance of audit illustrated above have an inevitable impact on perceptions and workloads further down the college structure. As the following quote from a lecturer indicates, the reasons behind the 'gambits of compliance' employed at leadership level often get lost, leaving staff with a perception of a useless administrative burden and a lack of trust:

"... its this kind of minute to minute kind of justification in this place, you have to do ... you know, if you give up your time or if you're kind of engaging in trying to do something different and you've got this whole admin stuff loaded on you, which is like burial rather than trying to make it easier for you – you know, to improve student experience – I think that is kind of ... could be put under the term undermining, really."

The picture is not entirely one-sided however. Study data also yielded examples of more open audit strategies by colleges, or more trust-based approaches from the regulatory bodies. For example, in talking through the grades awarded in a recent inspection of a general FE college, the newly appointed Principal, Kim, said:

"... and also, I know the Inspector - our reporting inspector here was our college inspector at (my previous college) where we turned the tides from having 4s to having 2s, so we know each other quite well. ... For me, I think – I think we got, especially in area 14 – we could have ended up with 4s and I think he gave us the benefit of the doubt knowing that it's an area that I will sort out because I've sorted it out already in two colleges."

The trust being demonstrated here is based on past knowledge of the 'auditee' rather than indicating a general approach, but is none-the-less viewed positively by Kim: as a recognition that things will be different under her Principalship and as a basis for a constructive working relationship. In return, Kim was willing to disclose her recognition of the issues and the need to improve in certain areas. The challenge appears to lie in convincing more colleges to take a more open approach: no easy feat on the back of historically punitive funding mechanisms and the adversarial relations they engendered. Conversely, it is hardly surprising if a number of high-profile college failures since incorporation makes self-regulation within the sector hard for the LSC to swallow, given that ultimately they are on the hook to government for the outcomes produced.

## **THEME 2: CHANGING BUREAUCRACY, NOT LESS**

Another college-level perception that emerges from the data is that the bureaucratic burden may be changing, but it isn't decreasing. In some cases, it is even seen as having become worse, as a result of transitional arrangements or additional 'audiences' to whom the audit must be performed. For example, the introduction of 9 Regional Directors within the LSC – designed to fulfil a co-ordination and liaison function between local LSC and government regional structures – is seen as adding to the list of people to whom colleges have to make themselves accountable, without adding value at a college level. The following fieldwork extract gives a flavour of the scepticism felt by one of the Principals shadowed in this regard:

**Fieldwork extract:** *Steve (SFC Principal) drafts a covering letter to the LSC Regional Director to accompany the funding proposal. Raises a number of issues discussed at last week's meeting which (the regional director) had promised to address. "And by her response will she be judged" – Steve is concerned that she will be too distant from local issues to add value or deliver informed decisions, but will still be someone to whom they have to answer. He is also concerned that the regional director comes from a vocational background and will therefore require considerable bringing up to speed on the needs and issues faced by sixth forms.*

Another Principal, commenting on the bureaucratic burden in her college, told us:

*"We spend too much time weighing the pig and not enough time fattening it. We are driven all the time by performance targets and indicators. And because of the change from direct funding targets and clawbacks to plan-led funding we have to pirouette on a pinhead to come in on target for last year to secure next year's funding." (Jean – Principal)*

The same Principal felt that a lack of clarity between the roles of the LSC and DfES at a national level had a negative impact on how the LSC worked with colleges at a local level, and that changes in structure were insufficient to generate the required change in culture:

*"The LSC needs very different ways of working. The 'bean-counting' mentality inherited by the LSC makes it difficult to work with them on strategic issues."  
(Jean – Principal)*

These perceptions at ground level suggest that the transparency called for by the BTF is yet to materialize, and that the intentions driving current changes are getting 'lost in translation' between the funding bodies and the providers. For example, the following fieldnote extract, relating to a conversation with an LSC auditor, shows that the perception that the LSC is simply replacing one audit mechanism with another is an over-simplification of what is currently happening:

**Fieldnote extract:** *Paul says that the removal of the detailed funding audit for most colleges has eliminated over 20,000 audit days per year, the cost of which was top-sliced from the funding budget for those colleges. The new 'regularity and propriety' audit will create a requirement for approximately 2,000 audit days. The difference is that colleges will be directly responsible for commissioning and paying for this work, so the cost will be more visible to them. Paul says he believes colleges are gradually recognising that things have changed.*

In the same conversation, Paul acknowledged that the simplification of funding streams required to underpin a simplified audit process had yet to kick in, but that the materiality approach – which entails staying within basic legal limits rather than complying with a vast array of specific rules – was already starting to feed through. Ironically, in talking about this approach, one Principal commented that her staff were unhappy with it because a combination of past punitive regimes, 'picky' governors and professional idealism made them want to be 'squeaky clean'. Thus the need for culture change is in evidence on both sides of the sectoral divide, and the issues involved are both complex and deep-rooted.

### THEME 3: A LACK OF JOINED-UP THINKING

Linked to the idea of a changed, rather than a decreased, administrative burden is that of a lack of joined-up thinking – a perception that individual changes are implemented without thought for their implications elsewhere in the system. The fieldwork extracts above relating to a college applying for Premium Funding, and having to respond to a change in the criteria for success in the midst of the application process, is one example of this. Another example can be seen in the situation below, relating to changes in funding in respect of evening classes late on in the planning cycle, i.e. after the courses have been advertised, staffed, etc. The extract is taken from an SMT meeting where Sue, the VP – Curriculum, is outlining the changes and their implications:

**Fieldnote extract:** *Sue reports on the implications for the college of a cut in funding which has just been announced, due to the fact that they don't deliver key skills. Need to make decisions about how much part-time, adult provision they can do in September, given the reduced level of funding. Sue outlines the practical risks and cost implications to the college if they don't make target numbers overall. Weighs this against the fact that they have already marketed next terms' evening classes and contracted the teaching staff.*

In a similar example from another college, the Principal says that a change of phasing in the LSC funding received will have 'hugely negative consequences' and would 'result in a deficit in the Spring term'. He tells his management team that feedback on this issue has been given to the LSC at national level, but this doesn't change the practical implications of the change for him and his staff.

The situations noted above clearly reflect the significant lead times, and the need for transition arrangements, required to introduce major initiatives intended to simplify the sector's funding structures. Given that the existing complexity – designed to compensate colleges for high-cost courses or students through programme weighting and disadvantage recognition – has been described by a research participant from the LSC as 'complexity in the interests of fairness', it is also to be expected that some guidelines or constraints relating to the type and quality of provision will need to be retained. The danger appears to be that a combination of these factors, combined with the lack of trust and transparency identified by the Bureaucracy Task Force, has resulted in a perception at ground level that nothing has changed at all.

# Conclusion: But Aren't We All On the Same Side?

The fundamental culture change proposed by the Bureaucracy Task Force – replacing territorialism and tactics with trust and transparency – appears as a bold but necessary approach to the reduction of bureaucracy and the burden it imposes on those at the 'front line' of Further Education. In reflecting back our research findings to the Principals we studied, there was a common dismay at the prevalence of audit-related work in their everyday practices and a sense that this was wasted time in terms of the experience of students within their colleges. It is suspected that none of them would demur from the call for a more open working relationship with their regulatory bodies, though past history and present perceptions make it hard to see how this will be achieved.

According to Sir George Sweeney, Chairman of the BTF, the building of trust will require increased clarity of purpose from both the regulators and the providers. This, he believes, will convince those on the ground that the audit function is a healthy and necessary one, rather than a pointless imposition: *'If teachers can see the purpose of things, then they'll do it, and do it with good heart. There's a lot of idealism in this business.'* The difficulty appears to be twofold. Firstly, the apparent threat to the professional autonomy of teaching staff represented by the audit process refuses to go away, despite the acceptance of the audit function in most other professional contexts. And secondly, it takes two to tango, and the apparent lack of shared educational values emanating from their governmental masters may continue to make teachers unwilling to join the 'trust and transparency' dance. When the quality of provision they feel able to provide to their students is at stake, the risks may appear just too high.

# List of Research summaries

A central theme in our research has been the role of storytelling in daily leadership work. Leaders tell stories to followers, and followers tell stories to and about leaders. Such stories communicate ideas, share knowledge, vent frustrations and deal with conflict. In a sector where learning from experience is more common than formal training, the documenting and analysis of storytelling is an important way for us to better understand the daily challenges facing educational leaders. We therefore decided to present the initial findings from our research in the format of short stories. Listed below are the other titles in this series:

## **SHORT STORIES OF LEADERSHIP FROM THE FE SECTOR**

- 1 Explicating Leadership
- 2 Storytelling and Leadership
- 3 Leadership as Mundane Work
- 4 Technologies of Leadership
- 5 Meetings and Leadership
- 6 Leadership and Emotional Labour
- 7 Bureaucracy and Leadership
- 8 Leadership and Audit Cultures
- 9 Patterns of Leadership
- 10 Game Playing and Leadership Development
- 11 Understanding the Success and Failure of Leadership
- 12 The Language of Leadership

If you have found this short paper interesting, please have a look at the longer version, or other papers on our project website:

<http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/computing/research/cseg/projects/explicating>

## Further information and contact details

This project is investigating the nature of leadership and the everyday challenges of leading. Our project focuses on what it is that educational leaders really do, and document in detail the everyday practices of leadership in the learning and skills sector. Our understanding of the practical accomplishment of leadership is achieved through shadowing and studying education leaders from various institutions over long periods. The research will be central to revealing the nature of leadership, relations between leaders and the led, risk-taking and entrepreneurship. Our research began in November 2003 and a significant amount of fieldwork has been carried out in colleges from different geographical areas. Four colleges have been chosen for more detailed long-term study.

Our findings show that leadership in the learning and skills sector is less about the work of a few talented individuals and more about the successful organization of a complex network of distributed leadership practices involving staff from across the organization. Our research clearly shows that leadership is neither mystical nor heroic, but consists of relentless attention to relatively mundane tasks and much of leadership is management. Leadership depends on doing the 'grunt work' before any form of vision kicks in. In turn, improving the experience and culture of a college comes through attention to everyday mundane details. Our research evidence also shows the importance of technology (including management information systems and email) in their work, for example, in providing new ways of presenting data about colleges. The importance of the 'audit culture' on everyday leadership work is also evident in our research. This raises issues of how a concentration on external audits can lead to a neglect of more broad educational matters. We will be reporting the final results of the research to the DfES in March 2006. In the meantime we would be very pleased to receive any comments or suggestions in relation to the initial findings or any aspect you think is relevant to the research. All responses will be treated in the strictest confidence.

If you would like more information about the 'Explicating Leadership' research project please contact:

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