Professionalisation and professionalism in UK further education and training: a commentary

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Abstract

The UK further education and training (FE) sector has recently adopted many of the characteristics associated with formally-organised professions. In contrast with occupations where professional-isation is led by practitioners seeking greater coherence and control over their work, the process in FE has largely been policy-driven and imposed through legislative reform. This raises questions about the extent to which the model of profession promoted through the legislation is able to support professionalism as valued by teachers and trainers in practice, as well as more generally about the compatibility between current models of public-sector management and professional modes of organising. The sector's professional body has the difficult task of implementing reforms demanded of it as a state-backed regulator, while as a member-led and member-funded association also acting in the best interests of practitioners and learners.

Introduction

The further education and training sector in the United Kingdom (here abbreviated to FE) can broadly be defined as the set of publicly-funded activities that are left when schools, higher education and commercial and in-house training are removed from the equation. It includes technical, vocational and general further education; adult and community learning services; apprenticeships and other forms of publicly-funded work-based training; and education and training for offenders. The sector has permeable boundaries, overlapping with higher education, commercial training, and increasingly over the last decade with schools. Though sometimes referred to as the post-compulsory sector, this label is increasingly questionable both because of impending legislation that will extend compulsory participation in education or training to the age of 18, and particularly over the last ten years the increasing involvement of further education colleges in vocational education for 14 to 16-year-olds.

In 2009-10 the sector accounted for 4.6 million individual learners, compared with 8.1 million in schools and 2.5 million in higher education[1]. Recent estimates by the Institute for Learning suggest that it employs over 200,000 people in teaching and training roles, of whom around 150,000 work in FE full-time or have regular part-time roles. Nevertheless there has been a tendency to regard the sector as something of a 'cinderella,' a utilitarian part of the education scene that sits off to one side of the mainstream progression route through school and university (Hall 1990). Traditionally the professional identity and credibility of staff in much of the sector has come from their vocational expertise (Robson 1998), and anecdotal evidence suggests that until well into the 1980s the pay, conditions and standing of further education lecturers were as good and often better than those of teachers in schools. Since then drives to raise the status of the school sector, coupled with changes in further education colleges that initially at least imposed strains on resources and resulted in an

increasingly casualised workforce, have worked to reverse the situation; added to which conditions in other parts of the sector, with a few notable exceptions, have generally been poorer than in the colleges. In terms of their identity as teaching professionals, practitioners in FE have found themselves in a not entirely comfortable position between a resurgent and better-valued school sector and the traditional high-status subject-based expertise of higher education.

Against this background there has been a recent move towards 'professionalising' and regulating the sector in the sense of creating some of the characteristics of a formal profession, partly analogous to the situation in schools where teachers in the public sector have for many years been required to hold a recognised teaching qualification and since 2000 have been regulated by the General Teaching Councils (expected to be taken over from 2012 in England by a new agency within the Department for Education). New teachers in further education colleges in England have been required to take an approved teaching qualification since 2002 (Department for Education and Employment 2001), and from 2008 all teaching and training staff working on publicly-funded provision were required to join the Institute for Learning (IfL), originally set up as a voluntary professional association in 2002 and currently (2012) undergoing independent review; the requirement is statutory for staff in the colleges (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills 2007a) and attached to the conditions for funding in other parts of the sector. All new staff in the sector without an appropriate teaching qualification must take a 'preparing to teach' module in their first year, and achieve a recognised teaching or training qualification within five years of starting. IfL members are subject to the institute's disciplinary code and are required to maintain a portfolio of continuing professional development activity that is subject to random monitoring (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills 2007b).

Professions, professionals and professionalism

The idea of 'a profession' stems from the Latin word *profiteor*, meaning to profess in the sense of having expert knowledge but also with the connotation of taking an oath or making a formal commitment, as in a monastic vow; within this root are two of the defining characteristics of professions, expertise and ethics. As professions have become more formalised it has become common to identify other attributes that might characterise them, such as being self-organising, imposing conditions on gaining and retaining membership, and having functions that are recognised legally or by custom as the preserve of members. This can be described as a trait-based view of professions, and it is typified by the work of Millerson (1964) and Schein (1970), with a contemporary discussion in the context of teaching provided by Troman (2007). Lists of attributes are popular with occupations that want to define themselves as professions, as they provide markers that they can use to develop and track their professionalisation 'project.' Their problem is that they tend to be based on a few prominent professions or idealised types which may have limited relevance to currently-professionalising occupations, and they can lead to uncritical benchmarking as well as to unresolvable debates about the nature of professions in general or whether a particular occupation can be defined as a profession; as Eliot Freidson, one of the leading theorists of professions in the last century, warns, there are few features of professions that can be generalised with any validity (Freidson 1983).

Contemporary UK professions demonstrate a wide variety of characteristics and modes of organising. Law, for instance, often thought of as one of the archetypal self-governing professions, is not only divided into two major branches with different governing arrangements, but the solicitors' body has

recently split into a membership organisation and a regulator, introducing greater lay oversight of licensing; added to which there are surprisingly few activities that are legally restricted to solicitors ('reserved functions'). In occupations where there are legal restrictions on who can practise the picture becomes more complex and generally involves some form of state governance; medicine, another supposedly archetypal profession, is subject to a diverse set of influences that include the General Medical Council (the regulatory body), generalist and specialist membership organisations, and for public-sector practitioners various bodies set up as part of the National Health Service. In another of the ancient professions, university teaching, professional definition is principally through the relationship with the university (and is usually shared with the practitioner's identity as a subject-expert); there are no commonly-defined entry-gates or requirements to maintain membership beyond those of the employment relationship, and a recent attempt to create a universal professional body failed. Professions such as accountancy, surveying, personnel management and planning are self-organised and defined to a large extent by their associations (though in the case of the former membership is split between several bodies none of which can now be considered pre-eminent). However, other than financial audit for accountants, these lack legally reserved functions and the variety of models within this large middle sector is diverse. Moving into areas such as those associated with information technology, new media and the creative industries, while there are various occupations that are easily thought of as 'professional', formal professionalisation in terms of the presence of authoritative professional bodies and qualifying processes is the exception.

This diversity of professions also suggests that there are different ways of being defined as 'a professional.' Hoyle and John (1995), writing in the context of teaching, identify three characteristics of professionals that appear to have fairly universal application: the possession and use of expert or specialist knowledge; responsibility to clients and wider society through voluntary commitment to a set of values that goes beyond those inherent in any employment relationship; and the exercise of autonomous thought and judgement. Interestingly these say nothing about the way in which professionals are organised, trained, qualified or regulated, and they apply regardless of whether the practitioner is 'a professional' in the sense of being a member of a regulated occupation or a professional body, through the recognition their employment brings (as with university lecturers) or more broadly the type of work they do (for instance systems analysts), or through activity that while not associated with a well-defined occupation (or one that is normally regarded as 'a profession'), nevertheless demonstrates the concepts inherent in *profiteor* and marks them out individually as a professional.

The concept of being (a) professional is captured in the word professionalism, but as Evetts (2003) and Evans (2008) among others note this term is not used in a consistent manner. In an influential paper on teachers as professionals Eric Hoyle used professionalism in an almost political sense to mean "those strategies and rhetorics employed by members of an occupation in seeking to improve status, salary and conditions" (Hoyle 1974, p15), something that is closer to describing professionalisation. To Freidson (2001) professionalism is an ideology or ideal type in which work is controlled by occupations rather than by the market (consumerism) or by bureaucracies (managerialism), a definition that has had enduring resonance with writers on professions as phenomena. More recently some authors have used the word in the sense of producing a professional standard of work or meeting agreed expectations, something that may be achieved by bureaucratic means or 'organisational professionalism' (Evetts 2009) as well as by the 'occupational professionalism' (*ibid*) that is closer to Freidson's ideal. For the individual practitioner these

definitions have implications for what it is to *be a professional*, and they are bound up with professionalisation in that they concern the dynamics of how occupations 'work' within the wider economic system.

There is also a more everyday and phenomenological way that professionalism is constructed that is about *being professional* or acting professionally, and it is this sense of the word that will be used here. Professionalism from this viewpoint concerns a set of values enacted by a practitioner in a work situation. These might include at a general level things such as behaving in a civilised manner, conscientiousness, taking responsibility for one's actions, making ethical rather than easy choices, confidentiality, and standard of work or service; they will also include occupationally-specific aspects, such as acting in the best interest of the learner, and they can also extend to include things such as commitment to advancing practice and to contributing to the profession (cf Stenhouse's [1975] concept of 'extended professionalism'). The lack of clear terms to distinguish *being a professional* and *being professional* is unfortunate (Hoyle coined 'professionality' to mean something closer to the latter, although its usage tends to fall between the two); as will be discussed later, the values of being professional and the ideology of being a professional do not always point in the same direction.

The professionalisation 'project'

Historically, it is common to trace professions from the ancient learned occupations (the priesthood, university teaching, law and physicianship) through the professionalisation of some of the mediaeval trades (such as surgery and architecture) to the explosion in specialist occupations during the Industrial Revolution. Larson (1977) discusses the evolution of professions from this time onwards as essentially a 'market project,' where occupational groups seek to increase their influence, status and remuneration through a process of professionalisation, which typically leads to them gaining some greater or lesser degree of control over a particular employment or services market. While there is generally a social and material advantage to the occupation in doing this, it is also common for it to be motivated also by intrinsic factors: in gaining control of its field the profession can hold off market and bureaucratic forces to some degree, giving practitioners more control over their work and enabling them to provide their expertise impartially to the benefit of their clients, the public and in a more abstract sense to the field itself (Freidson 2001). The result of this process may be seen as a largely benign bargain between the occupation and wider society in which it is granted control and autonomy in return for employing its expertise in the public interest (Marquand 1997); alternatively, and particularly where professionalisation takes place without a corresponding degree of professionalism, it can be viewed as producing George Bernard Shaw's 'conspiracy against the laity' and empowering the professional at the expense of the public (a theme often associated with the left of British politics, but pursued most vigorously by Thatcherite conservatism).

The occupations where professionalisation has been strongest were initially those providing services in a nominally open market where there was already a tradition of guilds or associations, typified by the engineering and construction professions. The twentieth century also saw some employed occupations adopting a weaker form of professionalisation in order to strengthen their position within corporate or administrative organisations; librarians, personnel managers and housing officers are examples. Among other occupations working at what might be considered professional level, the drive for formal professionalisation has been weakest when the occupation is reasonably well-defined by employment relationships. Thus university lecturers, teachers and to an extent social workers,

who are strongly defined by the work they do and usually occupy the primary role-type within their organisations (or departments in the latter case), have been much less motivated towards professionalised forms of association than have personnel and housing officers, who have more need to create a distinct identity if they are not to be seen simply as administrators and managers. Larson (1977) cites teachers in the United States professionalising in response to the external pressures of the bureaucracy, although this does not appear to have been replicated in the UK and research in other occupations suggests that countering increased managerial control may not be a particularly strong driver for organising *as a profession* (e.g. Kennedy 2003).

The other major driver for professionalisation is one that emerges from a desire from the public or their representatives for accountability, particularly in those occupations that are concerned with public health and wellbeing rather than the provision of services in a marketplace. Unlike many of their continental counterparts (see Siegrist 1990), British (and more broadly anglophone) governments have been reluctant to regulate occupations unless a clear public interest is at stake, but a desire to manage risks in a complex society (cf Beck 1992) has increasingly led to professions coming under public scrutiny. Regulatory bodies for medicine and (school) teaching have already been mentioned along with the separation of responsibilities in law, but it is worth noting that three additional bodies have been set up in the health sector in the last decade, with an increasing number of occupations coming within their remit. While in some senses this is leading to a form of deprofessionalisation with laypeople (including non-specialist managers) being given more power over professional interests (see Ozga 1995, Broadbent *et al* 1997 and Noordegraf 2007 for different perspectives on this), it is also driving a more formal type of professionalisation where regulation is adopting (and enforcing) many of the methods of the traditional professional project: defined entry qualifications, codes of practice, compulsory updating, and procedures to investigate and respond to malpractice.

Against this background FE is a particularly interesting case. The workforce in colleges (including adult education departments) has had little pressure to embark on a project of professionalisation, because (as with colleagues in schools and higher education) it is as a rule defined well enough through the organisations within which it works. While the sector's primary trade union is well-subscribed and fulfils some of the roles of a professional association, there has been little voluntary impetus to move towards formal professionalisation; though it was partly practitioner-led in origin the IfL accounted for only a tiny proportion of the workforce until backed by legislation (similarly small proportions may have joined other associations such as the former Institute of Training and Development or the Institute of IT Trainers). Equally, the pressures for regulation have until recently been slight: college tutors, while having an increased duty of care to students in the 16-18 age range compared with that of university staff dealing with largely post-18s, have escaped many of the demands placed on their colleagues in schools to act *in loco parentis*.

Over the last twenty-five years this situation has changed for several reasons, including the removal of colleges from local authority control, the large-scale public funding of commercial and voluntary organisations to deliver education and training, the sector's involvement in the education of under-16s, and increased acceptance that the welfare of post-16s should be in the sphere of public concern. In principle this moves the sector closer to conditions that favour voluntary professionalisation, though the evidence pre-2008 suggests that movement in this direction has still been limited; this is perhaps aided by the strong identity still conferred by further education colleges, and the aforementioned

tendency of some practitioners particularly in vocational areas to identify themselves most strongly with their primary occupation. That the sector's professionalisation project is legislatively driven rather than voluntary is therefore unequivocal, although the way that it is being taken forward is unusual. Unlike the GTC, the health regulatory councils or even the Solicitors' Regulation Authority, the IfL is a self-governing membership body that is now (and controversially) fully-funded by subscription while benefitting from a legal requirement for membership. A more characteristic approach would have been for the government to set up a regulatory council along the lines of the GTC, or simply to expand the GTC or its successor to incorporate FE. While protected functions have in the past been granted to members of self-governing professional bodies (the restriction of company audits to chartered and certified accountants is an example), recent policy has been to avoid creating restrictions on practice without public oversight, as is apparent both in the regulation of certain aspects of psychology through the Health Professions Council rather than the independent professional body, and in objections to proposals to bring the protected title of 'architect' back under the control of RIBA (the membership body) rather than the separate registration board. The IfL is therefore somewhat unique as a member-led body that has been much-enlarged through regulation, and which (at least judging by the protests when membership fees ceased to be subsidised) would at present probably revert to a smaller band of committed members in its absence.

Professionalisation versus professionalism?

The *regulatory* intent of professionalisation is generally twofold: on the one hand to increase professionalism at least in the sense of better practice, and on the other to improve accountability to the public rather than purely to the profession. An assumption is normally made that putting in place the structures commonly associated with professionalisation – codification of knowledge or practice, a formal entry-gate, some form of professional body or registration council, an enforceable code of practice and a requirement to keep up-to-date – act to enhance professionalism. Whether or not these assumptions are borne out is the crux of whether the FE sector's professionalisation project is a worthwhile and valuable exercise, or whether it is the imposition of a structure that results in compliance rather than lasting benefit (cf Evans 2008).

In theory the structures listed above should support professionalism in that they respectively ensure that practitioners have a minimum standard of understanding and competence and are inducted into the profession's ethos and set of values, provide a focus that supports the formation of professional communities and allows knowledge to be shared and disseminated, provide a framework of expectations and practising standards, and encourage practice to be kept up-to-date. Problems tend to arise when they are implemented in a way that doesn't accord with how (effective and ethical) practitioners actually work, they are based on procedural standards, or they provide insufficient room for practitioners to exercise discretion and act professionally. A good example is the way that some professional bodies have gone about creating rules for continuing professional development (CPD). Approaches that are geared principally to compliance (e.g. accumulating hours or points, or producing paper evidence of attending events) can stimulate a certain amount of useful development, but they can be more a means of picking up those who are falling behind than enthusing more conscientious practitioners (see Houle 1980). It is not unusual for CPD as a formal process (Friedman 2002, Friedman & Woodhead 2008) to develop in a way that is not particularly well-referenced to ongoing professional development as it actually takes place in the field (e.g. Gear *et al* 1994, Felstead *et al* 2005, Eraut & Hirsh 2007), so that in the worst cases CPD as demanded by the professional body

has limited overlap with the learning needed by the practitioner to be effective and to move on in his or her practice or career; consciously or otherwise the professional body can place more emphasis on being seen to operate a compliance mechanism than encouraging development that benefits practitioners or those they serve.

To put this into a more general context, it is worth noting that the currently dominant models of professionalisation have their roots in the industrialisation and bureaucratisation of the twentieth and late nineteenth centuries, and are based in a 'technical-rational' or 'technocratic' way of thinking (Schön 1983, Bines 1992) that takes a technical and operational view of the education and function of the professional. As a paradigm this is broadly of a piece with the idea of progress through technology and scientific management along with the dominance of logical positivism in the human and social sciences, things that reached their zenith in the 1960s and 70s. Since then there has been gradual recognition that the technocratic approach, while it can provide a strong base for some aspects of professional work, lacks adequacy for many of the demands facing practitioners particularly in open-ended situations where there are no obvious right answers, technical solutions or unequivocal evidence-bases to fall back on. The idea of the 'reflective practitioner' put forward by Donald Schön (1983, 1987) represented a version of being professional based on reflection, active enquiry and creative synthesis; this (along with the uptake of complementary approaches such as action learning and action research) signified an emergent paradigm that can be described as reflective-interpretive or reflective-creative (Lester 2008). It has been taken up most enthusiastically in occupations such as teaching, social work and to an extent nursing that, while potentially strongly evidence-informed, do not otherwise fit particularly well with technocratic principles and have struggled to define themselves as professions in the technical-rational mould. It has also become influential across a wider spectrum of professions where it has tended to influence and emphasise the more practical aspects of activity, such as 'lawyering' rather than law, patient care rather than clinical practice, or design rather than specification. Issues arise however when occupations that wholeheartedly endorse post-technocratic principles in relation to professionalism struggle to move beyond models of professionalisation that are framed in older ways of thinking.

The situation in further education and training

Returning to FE, the sector's trajectory of professionalisation can be seen as balancing between a view of professionalism that is both evidence-informed and reflective-creative, and external influences on formal professionalisation that are more traditionally technocratic. As a professional body the IfL has had to focus initially on the statutory aspects of its role relating to qualified status, CPD and the code of practice, so it is probably too early to judge how effectively it supports professionalism other than through these aspects of its work. In terms of potential services to practitioners it occupies some of the same space as the practitioners' representative body the Universities and Colleges Union, the publicly-funded Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), and the voluntary National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) and Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN) among others; while some local initiatives such applications of Reflect (the IfL's e-portfolio and document sharing tool) and individual research grants have proved highly successful, the IfL has still to establish itself as a natural forum and source of support for practitioners.

The introduction of compulsory teaching qualifications from 2002 onwards can be regarded as a major plank in the enforced professionalisation project. The approach used differs from that for

school teachers in a number of respects, including in the use of two levels of qualification with the higher level specified at a minimum of (English and European) level 5 rather than above (school teachers, social workers and nurses now all qualify at level 6 and many professions at level 7), and the qualifications being designed according to what has been described as a further education/occupational model rather than a higher education/professional one (Lucas & Nasta 2010). As in almost all formalised professions a distinction is now made between the qualification (e.g. the CertEd or DTLLS) which is held for life, and the qualified status (in this case Associate or Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills, ATLS or QTLS) that acts as the licence to practise and can be revoked or given up (Lester 2009). The principal anomaly at present (shared with school teaching but few other professions) is that while the IfL is responsible for qualified status and standards of practice, another body (now LSIS) sets the standards on which courses and assessments are based. Whether the current model provides a best fit for the sector awaits to be seen, but there has been an attempt to reflect its distinctive characteristics in the qualifying process: the way the qualifications are structured, the recognition provided for at least some earlier certificates, the option to be assessed on the basis of experience, the timescale allowed for achievement, and the reflective rather than prescriptive nature of the process to gain qualified status all suggest a desire for inclusivity and recognition of the diverse nature of the sector.

The extent to which certification enhances professionalism can be debated; it is not, for instance, a necessity for commercial trainers, systems analysts or currently (in their teaching role) university lecturers, and was not even encouraged in some colleges before the 1990s. In nursing, while the need for certification is not contested, the introduction of all-graduate entry has given rise to sometimes heated debate about the effect on professionalism particularly in terms of attitudes to basic patient care, as well as on access and diversity within the profession (e.g. UNISON 2008). In FE the requirement for those with more than a minimal teaching or training role to hold an appropriate qualification is probably now non-negotiable, and the benefits of basic training (or recognition of existing competence) for new entrants unlikely to be subjected to serious challenge. Potential issues do arise however on the (quite large) fringes of the sector, for instance for those whose roles are confined to assessment and one-to-one support, or teaching on-line; those who teach occasionally or for a small number of hours, but just fall within the regulations; and those involved in funded in-company training, who are often drawn from the general workforce. The problem here is that certification and membership requirements can result in people who are otherwise competent – and who may be recognised as such by their employers – deciding to focus elsewhere rather than go through what can appear to them to be quite onerous qualification requirements. While from a professionalised standpoint the loss of 'lay' teachers and trainers may be seen as a necessary result of progress, from a professional one the sector loses if the skilled fitter, hairdresser or farmer, or the semi-retired accountant or career-break graphic designer, decide that the time and effort needed to become qualified are not justified by the amount of teaching or training that they do.

The other part of the professionalisation process that has featured prominently is the mandatory requirement for continuing professional development. The 2007 regulations frame this as a minimum of 30 hours per year, reduced pro-rata for part-time teachers with an absolute minimum of six hours. This purely input-based measure – the regulations only indicate that CPD should be carried out and recorded, not that it should be relevant or useful – has been interpreted in a more reflective-creative mode by the IfL, so that practitioners are encouraged to include and make use of development from a wide range of sources including action-based learning, reflection on practice and personal reading,

and (ideally) to reflect on and share what has been learned (IfL/LSIS 2010). Inevitably the process introduces a burden of recording that may not in itself have any added value, although it should avoid any need to undertake development activities that are of marginal benefit. Early evidence (IfL 2010) indicates that while there is some opposition to CPD recording, the process itself can encourage useful reflection, discussion and further learning; it is also relatively light, and in practice the time requirement is not proving to be problematic with the mean number of hours declared being more than 50% above the minimum. While Houle's dilemma as mentioned earlier is still relevant, the lack of prescription and the level of trust present in the IfL system point to a will to make CPD requirements work for practitioners rather than using them principally as a form of audit.

The final major component of professionalisation put in place by IfL is the code of practice and associated disciplinary process. Codes of practice can be viewed as the formal interpretation of the value-commitment implied by *profiteor*, and their purpose is generally twofold: to provide a visible statement of the profession's values for practitioners to follow and for clients to be aware of, and to provide criteria for use in judging complaints against members. In professions where practitioners normally work for clients, the disciplinary powers of the professional body can be an important safeguard against malpractice, and a basis for redress if things go wrong. In those where the majority of practitioners are employed by or work on behalf of another organisation (as with an assessor contracted to a training company), they have a more limited disciplinary function as it is likely that in the first instance problems will be dealt through the employer. There is still some value in the profession's disciplinary process in that it can enable members to be expelled for serious misconduct, in theory preventing them from gaining similar employment elsewhere, and it can offer a last resort for learners and others who have substantial complaints that have not been upheld by the member's employing organisation. In practice it is normal for disciplinary procedures to sit in the background and only be invoked in response to malpractice, but the code of practice can have a stronger role not only within the profession but as a means of communicating professional standards across the wider sector, including to employers and other stakeholders.

Professionalism in the work context

The above discussion has focused on two of the main parties to professionalisation, the individual and the professional body, but both the professionalisation project and the ability of practitioners to act professionally are critically influenced by the context of employment. This is particularly true in FE which while not entirely in the public sector is largely publicly-funded and subject to public policy, and for the great majority of practitioners involves employment rather than self-employment or partnership; as with other public services it has experienced a transition from older modes of organising to the quasi-market-oriented, target-driven approach of 'new public management' (Newman 2005, and see Coffield *et al* 2007 and Evans 2008 among others for discussions specific to the sector). The effect on the practitioner can be to de-emphasise the role of the teacher as expert and decision-maker, and replace it with one that is closer to being a service provider within a contractually-oriented system. The type of professionalism demanded in this situation is different, and at least on the surface it is based on technical competence more than on the ability to make complex judgements in ambiguous situations (cf Brint 1994). However, the idea that ambiguity and complexity can be managed out of the roles of teachers or trainers – something that in reality is likely to be believed by few even if it appears to be an assumption behind some policy initiatives – betrays a misunderstanding of what their work necessarily entails (Wallace & Hoyle 2005), and it potentially leads to a distracting and

dangerous type of restricted professionalism that would, if allowed to become translated into practice, undermine the sector's ability to function effectively. Fortunately perhaps practitioners can be adept at finding ways around restricted remits, and various strategies are employed to continue to act in a way that the individual defines as professional (e.g. Gleeson & James 2007, Jameson 2008).

To approach this from another perspective, it is revealing to identify how concerns as expressed in recent inspection reports relate to this trend and to individual professionalism. Taking a random selection of reports from across the sector[2], while concerns about teaching (e.g. the variety of styles and methods) features in just over a third, this is the same as the individualisation of learning (e.g. use of initial assessments and individual learning plans), less than issues with reviewing and tracking learner progress (41%) and only slightly more than the use of information and communications technology (29%). These factors will to some extent reflect the current priorities of the inspectorate, but they are revealing in that they suggest if anything slightly more concern with the way that provision is organised than with the way that individual teachers go about their work. Ironically, if an environment of restricted professionalism is assumed, this suggests that effort directed towards increasing the competence and probity of individual teachers will probably be less effective than improving the organisation of courses and learner support.

The agenda of 'becoming professional' in FE, both for the individual and for the overall community of practitioners, is therefore necessarily bound up with the development of the way the sector is managed at a macro-level. While the goal of effective teaching and learning can be seen as shared by the interests of markets and bureaucracies as well as professionals, there are tensions between on the one hand the sector's professionalisation agenda and on the other the target-driven and contractually-based reforms that are also driving change. As Kirkpatrick *et al* (2005) indicate in their research into public-sector professions, public management reforms both influence the way that professions work and are influenced by them; this suggests that an effective FE profession needs to promote professionalism at an individual level while also influencing the work context and the policies that shape it in order to enable this professionalism to be exercised effectively.

Conclusion

The professionalisation 'project' of the FE sector is unequivocally driven by legislation as part of a wider public policy agenda to improve and hold accountable the provision of publicly-funded services, linked to a market-oriented form of bureaucratic organising which emphasises contractual targets and standards. Whether this is viewed charitably as a realisation that occupational control over complex work yields better results than more bureaucratic modes of organising, or less charitably as an attempt by policymakers to colonise the professional ideal and subvert it to a restrictive set of ends, it is clear that there has been a certain amount of clumsiness in determining the institutional arrangements for taking the project forward. Self-regulation may in many ways be preferable to state regulation, but there is a contradiction in attempting to set up a self-regulating profession through legislation along with a lack of realism in expecting practitioners to take ownership of the associated forms of organising in less than a decade. The legitimation of the member-funded IfL to become a statutory regulator and take forward an agenda that a significant proportion of practitioners may not support is therefore a risky undertaking, and it leaves the institute in a position of needing to gain credibility and sustain its existence in a changing balance between government policy interests, the wider interests of members, and the practicalities of how the sector is developing. This issue is

compounded to some extent by responsibility for training standards resting with a separate body, a situation that could easily have been remedied on the demise of the former standard-setting body Lifelong Learning UK in 2011. Nevertheless, and ironically for practitioners who are voicing opposition to IfL membership, the institute may be the best protection against a more rigid form of state regulation imposed by an executive agency or other unrepresentative body.

The conditions in which the FE sector now operates have made a move to some form of regulation perhaps inevitable, and the distance travelled along this route over the last decade would now be extremely difficult to abandon. The question is however open as to whether the current tensions are resolved by a more explicit form of state regulation, or whether there is evolution in the more challenging but potentially more rewarding direction of a genuinely self-regulating profession.

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Notes

(1) Sources: respectively Department for Business, Innovation and Skills/National Statistics; Department for Education/National Statistics; Higher Education Statistics Agency.

(2) Seventeen reports were examined (5 further education colleges, 5 non-college providers of work-based training, 3 adult and community learning providers, 2 sixth-form colleges and 2 prisons; all inspections were within the last five years and all were graded from 1 (excellent) to 3 (acceptable).

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