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**University of Southampton**  
**Faculty of Law, Arts and Social Sciences**  
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**The influence of background and demographic  
factors on the leadership of further education  
principals**

**By**  
**Stephen Finch**

**Thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Education (EdD)**

**May 2012**

**Faculty of Law, Arts and Social Sciences**

**School of Education**

**The influence of background and demographic factors on the leadership of further education principals**

**By Stephen Finch**

**Abstract**

This study is an investigation into the backgrounds of senior managers and leaders in the Further Education (FE) sector in England. In particular, the research aims to establish whether there is a link between the educational, professional or experiential background of a leader and the style of leadership that they perceive they display.

There is a paucity of research that has been carried out on the subject of leadership in the further education arena.

This thesis focuses on three approaches to leadership, transformational, distributed and managerial, which, it is argued, are the most relevant in the FE sector. The thesis also seeks to explore other factors that have an influence on the way in which FE principals lead.

The research is carried out using a mixed method approach. An internet survey and semi-structured interviews are used as the data gathering tools. The study suggests that there are many influences on the way in which FE principals lead which include their background in addition to college culture and the context in which the college operates.

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### **Declaration of Authorship**

I, Stephen Finch, declare that the thesis entitled “The influence of background and demographic factors on the leadership of further education principals” and the work presented in this thesis are my own and have been generated by me as a result of my own original research. I can confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- where I have quoted the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself or jointly with others, I have made clearly exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- none of this work has been published before submission.

Signed.....

Date.....

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The focus of this study is an investigation into the backgrounds of senior managers and leaders in the Further Education (FE) sector in England. In particular, the research aims to establish whether there is a link between the educational, professional or experiential background of a leader and the style of leadership that they perceive they display.

I have chosen to study this area because I have worked in the FE sector for fifteen years and in this period I have seen the changing nature of management from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) (following the Further and Higher Education Act 1992) to the establishment of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in April 2001 moving towards management by individual Local Education Authorities in March 2010. Further Education has been cited as the “Cinderella service” (Randle and Brady, 1997, p.121) sitting as it does between the much more widely researched school and university sectors. I am interested in knowing more about the leaders in this sector – to answer questions such as: Where are they from? How did they get to where they are now? Why did they choose this route? Do they lead in a specific way for a reason? I want to find out if leadership style is embedded into the background of those leading in FE today. To use an analogy, a growing number of people are concerned about where their food comes from these days, I am interested in the provenance of FE leaders.

At the time of writing, the further education sector is facing up to the coalition government’s funding cuts with plans to cut FE funding by 25% by the year 2015 (TES 08/04/11). A study carried out by teaching unions stated that “... 93 per cent of the colleges that responded to the survey have already made employees redundant since June 2009, with 80 per cent saying they had cut courses or student provision in the same period” (TES, 08/04/11). It will be interesting to ascertain how this situation will impact on the leadership practice of the principals participating in this thesis research.

The study explores a number of issues which include the definition of the terms leadership and management. Academics and others have struggled

with the concept of defining each term; for example Rees and Porter (2008) state that “The distinction between leadership and management is difficult to define exactly, if only because there is no commonly agreed definition of the term leadership” (p.243). The same writers (2008) also point out that “There is also considerable overlap between the terms leadership and management” (p.243). Moreover, in an FE College context the terms leadership and management are invariably conjoined as Ofsted grade colleges in “leadership and management” and do not comment on any differences between the two. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be using the term leader although this does not preclude those individuals from undertaking duties which could be classified as management.

Another issue examined is the nature of the diversity apparent amongst senior FE leaders. The investigation into the backgrounds of senior leaders will allow an insight into the diversity of the individuals running FE institutions. This will, by its nature, be a very narrow definition of diversity as I am only focussing on the educational and employment backgrounds of leaders due to the practicalities and manageability necessary for an EdD thesis. In previous studies, the diversity of learners has been researched in some detail, however “Diversity in relation to those who lead and manage learning has received far less attention among practitioners or researchers” (Morrison et al, 2007, p.1). By deciding to research elements of diversity in leaders in the FE sector and the influence this may have on their style of leadership, I am targeting a gap in research to date. To emphasise this, when contacting organisations at the start of this research process, the Association of Colleges (AoC) commented that they have never carried out any research into the educational backgrounds of leaders and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) have not collected data on the highest qualification of educators since 2005.

Leadership styles have been categorised in a multitude of ways over time and as concluded in a study attempting to construct a conceptual framework for leadership inquiry by Richmon and Allison (2003) “Leadership is understood, by different scholars, as encompassing widely different features and characteristics” (p.33). Furthermore, these writers “...reached a tentative conclusion that at the root of the confusion in the literature on leadership lies the lack of a broadly shared understanding of what leadership means”

(Richmon and Allison, 2003, p.33). There have, nonetheless, been countless attempts to categorise leadership such as Stogdill's (1974, as quoted in Richmon and Allison, 2003) proposal of six broad types of leadership theories: these being great man, environmental, personal-situational, interaction-expectation, humanistic and exchange theories. Leithwood et al (1999) define six models of leadership: instructional, transformational, moral, participative, contingent and managerial. In a study for the Centre for Excellence in Leadership, Govindji and Linley (2008, p.3) suggest that in the further education context the "...four dominant models to use are instructional, transformational, organizational learning and managerial leadership". In recent years there has been a growth in research into the distributed leadership style where shared leadership is common. A note of caution is that "...part of the appeal of distributed leadership resides in its chameleon like quality; it means different things to different people" (Harris et al, 2007, p.3). Careful consideration of these and the myriad of other styles is needed in order to determine the leadership categories into which I will attempt to place the FE leaders subject to my investigations.

My research aims seek to:

- Investigate the educational backgrounds of FE leaders
- Investigate the professional backgrounds of FE leaders
- Explore the leadership practice of FE leaders
- Analyse the relationship between FE leaders' backgrounds and their leadership practice



## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

This review focuses initially on the available literature dealing with the often challenging concept of leadership in education. The prime purpose of the first section of the literature review is to gain an understanding of the approaches to leadership that have been reported. The substantial range of leadership literature has been considered and an attempt has been made to identify those leadership approaches that are specifically appropriate in a further education (FE) setting. There is a paucity of research that has been carried out on the subject of leadership in the further education arena, as pointed out by Hughes, Taylor and Tight (1996, p.13) – “There has been relatively little critical analysis of policy or practice within further education, in the sense of trying to explain and understand these experiences from the outside”. The same writers continue – “there has been almost no theorisation or model building, making use of the wealth of available disciplinary frameworks from the social sciences” (Hughes, Taylor and Tight, 1996, p.13). Much of the leadership reading carried out for this review is therefore related to school and higher education research. The prime purpose of the second section of the literature review is to investigate studies on the influence of educational and professional background on leadership in further education. As in the first section of this review the volume of existing research is underwhelming. There is therefore a need to, once again, look outside the boundaries of the FE sector.

#### **2.1 Leadership**

This section of the literature review gives a brief overview of the concept of leadership. Leadership has proved over the years to be a challenging term to define. This however, has not stopped researchers attempting to do so. In fact, in introducing a book on leadership, Leithwood et al (1999, p3) asked why “do we need another book on leadership ... on the shelves in just one of our offices are 213 different such books already”. There continues to be a desire to research the subject further despite the fact that there is no likelihood of a consensus of opinion when defining leadership. Indeed, common practice among scholars is to avoid defining leadership at all. Rost (1991) found that in 587 studies analysed that referred to leadership in their titles, 366 of them did

not define leadership. The definition of leadership chosen could have very different implications for an individual being regarded as either a 'good' or a 'bad' leader. Leadership in education could be viewed as being a function within the organisation which an individual performs. Alternatively, leadership could focus on the leaders themselves – their skills, knowledge and characteristics – and the way in which they drive the organisation forward. These concepts will be explored in more detail in the subsequent section of this literature review. Another important area of much debate is the distinction between leadership and management. Academics such as Rees and Porter (2008) have struggled with the concept of defining each term with some overlap between the definitions.

A useful table (table 2.1) highlighting potential differences between leadership and management is put forward by Everard et al (2004).

**Table 2.1: The differences between leading and managing (Everard et al, 2004, p.23)**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>LEADING is concerned with:</b></li> <li>• Vision</li> <li>• Strategic issues</li> <li>• Transformation</li> <li>• Ends</li> <li>• People</li> <li>• Doing the right things</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <b>MANAGING is concerned</b></li> <li>* Implementation</li> <li>* Operational issues</li> <li>* Transaction</li> <li>* Means</li> <li>* Systems</li> <li>* Doing things right</li> </ul> |
|---|---|

In an FE College context, management is the preferred term for those who deal with the operational issues of college such as curriculum planning. Leadership is more connected with overseeing the strategic planning and direction of the college and so is more relevant to my studies. Leadership is the area of focus of this thesis and particularly the practice of senior management, i.e. principals in further education establishments.



## **2.2 Leadership approaches and styles**

In this section of the review I will investigate the literature concerning the way in which leadership has been categorised into approaches and styles and discuss how a framework can be devised that will enable research into leadership in further education to be effective. As I have suggested in the previous section of the literature review, the sheer volume of research that has been undertaken is almost overwhelming. Indeed, leadership styles have been categorised in a multitude of ways over time (Richmon and Allison, 2003). This has led me to the conclusion that guidance is required in limiting the range of categories of leadership that can be considered given the focus of this thesis and the time and space available in such a research project. I have chosen to focus my attention on the work completed by Bush and Glover (2003). Their report "School leadership: Concepts and Evidence" reviews the eight broad theories of leadership that these researchers have adapted from the earlier work of Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999). Even though Bush and Glover's typology relates to schools, the writers have drawn on research from other areas of the educational spectrum. As mentioned elsewhere in this review, there is a paucity of literature relating to leadership in the Further Education sector and so options are limited. This self-imposed restraint will allow the review to be manageable. It is the aim of this review to critique and further adapt the typology put forward by Bush and Glover (2003) to suit the research I will carry out in relation to leadership practice in further education. I have chosen the term 'leadership practice' to convey my desire to highlight a leadership framework that has utility in a further education environment.

Bush and Glover's Typology is illustrated in Table 2.2.

**Table 2.2: Bush and Glover's leadership typology (2003, p.33)**

- Instructional leadership
- Transformational leadership
- Moral leadership
- Participative leadership
- Managerial leadership
- Post-modern leadership
- Interpersonal leadership
- Contingent leadership

I will consider each in turn with a view to explore the validity of such a typology before adapting the framework to meet the needs of my thesis.

### **2.2.1 Instructional leadership**

With particular reference to a school environment, instructional leadership "... typically focuses on the behaviours of teachers as they engage in activities affecting the growth of students" (Leithwood and Duke, 1999, p.47). This could be the planning and delivery of teaching and learning and the influence derived from expertise and the formal position the leader finds themselves in. In the college environment that is the focus of this thesis, "... instructional leadership has much to offer at curriculum level, particularly in terms of embedding new teaching and learning strategies" (Sawbridge, 2001, p.3). This leadership approach may be seen best at middle management level where there are leaders who still have a teaching commitment and therefore have more direct influence on teaching and learning than senior leaders. In the Further Education sector, as opposed to schools, even if senior leaders have some day to day connection with teaching and learning it tends to be a small proportion of time relative to the percentage of the week carrying out other duties. It is important to note that I will be researching leaders' perceptions of their own leadership practice which could differ from their leadership practice as perceived by others. It is likely that FE college principals will state that teaching and learning is central to the way in which they lead. However, it is possible that the "bottom line" to their leadership is to ensure that financial and recruitment targets are met through effective teaching and learning. It could

be argued that the size of Further Education establishments leads principals to be distant from the teaching and learning that takes place. Indeed Lumby and Tomlinson (2000), in their study into the perceptions of eight college Principals, state that “They were all removed from a detailed involvement with the curriculum” (p.149). However, Bush and Glover (2003) argue that instructional leadership is a very important construct as it focuses on an educational establishment’s central activities, that is, teaching and learning. It is also seen as being a vital element of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) Leadership Development Framework as one of the ‘10 propositions’ – “school leadership must be instructionally focused” (NCSL, 2001, p.5). Bush and Glover (2003) have their provisos with this theory of leadership as there is a concern that “this paradigm underestimates other aspects of school life, such as socialisation, student welfare and self esteem” (p.7). Leithwood (1994) also has doubts as to the effectiveness of using instructional leadership in today’s education system due to the approach being “heavily classroom focused” (p.499) and feels that instructional leadership “is now showing all the signs of a dying paradigm” (p.502). It seems that Bush and Glover (2003) are doubtful as to whether instructional leadership is of much value in the current educational climate. Whilst praising the approach for its focus on teaching and learning, which all educational establishments state is at the centre of all they stand for, the writers also see the flaws in such an approach. Other researchers, such as Sawbridge (2001), understand the need for instructional leadership at curriculum level but less so at the higher levels of management that I am targeting in this thesis. In contrast to this viewpoint, Govindji and Linley (2008, p.3) argue that “In UK further education, this model has a good degree of resonance, since managers tend to move away from direct involvement with the curriculum as they take on more managerial responsibilities” but with a word of caution that the model tends to overemphasise the role of the principal. This quote even contradicts itself and therefore shows the confusion that surrounds this approach to leadership. The instructional leadership model is not one that has been used in this thesis as the writers on this subject show signs of contradiction and confusion over not just its worth as a style but also its definition.

As in much research, there seems to be a contrasting set of opinions in terms of the usefulness of the instructional model of leadership. All researchers, however, recognise the numerous flaws in its approach.

### **2.2.2 Transformational Leadership**

It has been stated that transformational leadership is “perceived to foster collaboration and participative decision-making” (Leader, 2004, p.69).

According to the theory, a transformational leader is one who inspires, motivates and encourages a culture of questioning and intellectual stimulation and supports individuals to meet new challenges. This, of course, assumes that followers of transformational leaders are willing and able to be inspired and motivated, happy to have their intellect stimulated and keen to meet new challenges. Staff who are resistant to the vision of the leader may feel controlled by the use of the transformational model – “...it may also be criticized as being a vehicle for control over teachers and more likely to be accepted by the leader than the led” (Chirichello, 1999, p.3). Bass and Avolio (1994) identify the ‘Four Is’ as being important leadership behaviours in this model. Firstly, *idealised influence* (p.27), which is the ability of the leader to gain the trust, respect and support of their followers. Secondly, *inspirational motivation* (p.27), which is the ability to inspire and to focus the individual’s attention on the achievement of shared goals. The third ‘I’ is *intellectual stimulation* (p.27), where individuals are encouraged to constantly evaluate their ways of working and the values of the organisation, thus promoting a culture of questioning and challenge. Finally, *individualised consideration* (p.27), which takes into account support for individuals to allow them to develop to meet new goals and challenges. These behaviours suggest that transformational leadership aims to capture the “hearts and minds” (Muijs et al, 2006, p.88) and as such has proved to be a popular approach to consider in an educational context. In a recent study into this leadership approach, Govindji and Linley (2008) suggest that “there is strong evidence to support the efficacy of transformational leadership in education where it exists, but this leadership style tends to be in its infancy in many further education colleges” (p.4).

In relation to education in general, it has been found to be “the leadership practice which is most written about in FE, often by principals themselves” (Sawbridge, 2001, p4). It is often written about in conjunction with transactional leadership with the distinction between the two cited as the inspirational role of the transformational leader in bringing out the best in his or her subordinates. Transformational leadership is seen to build on the foundations of the transactional approach as a more team orientated approach to activities is adopted through the inspiration of the leader to expand the basic needs and wants of followers. As Miller and Miller (2001, p.182) explain “through the transforming process, the motives of the leader and follower merge”.

In a research report for the Learning and Skills Research Centre (LRSC) in 2005, Lumby found that “transformational forms of leadership were considered to be the most effective by respondents” and “...were also considered to be most descriptive of respondents’ own leadership activities”. This supports Sawbridge’s (2001) assertion regarding leaders’ views of their own leadership practice.

Bush and Glover (2003) suggest that the transformational model is a comprehensive approach to leadership that has its strengths in terms of “direct and indirect effects on progress with school-restructuring initiatives and teacher-perceived student outcomes” (Leithwood, 1994, p.506). However, a word of caution is added by Bottery (2001) stating that “a more centralised, more directed, and more controlled educational system has dramatically reduced the possibility of realising a genuinely transformational education and leadership” (p.215).

The issue that needs to be addressed in the methodology section of this thesis is how to discern transformational leadership. In other words, what sort of behaviour needs to be present and recognised in order for leaders to be acknowledged as displaying the qualities of a transformational leader? Who decides that the behaviour is appropriate? There is also potential for exploring the proposition, as suggested Lumby’s 2005 LSDA report that transformational leadership is a practice that has been adopted more readily by female leaders, with male leaders displaying a tendency to act in a more transactional fashion.

Despite these complications, transformational leadership is an approach that has been included in my framework as it is seen by many academics and leaders themselves as a frequently cited practice in an FE context. An exploration of how the practice can be recognised will follow in the methodology section.

### **2.2.3 Moral Leadership**

Moral leadership is a leadership conceptualisation whose recent proponents include Sergiovanni (1996), Fullan (2003), Bush and Glover (2003), Greenfield (2004) and Quick and Normore (2004). In this model the values of the leader are crucial. The expectation of this approach to leadership is that "... a public declaration of values and purpose can help turn schools into virtuous communities where teachers are self-managers and professionalism is considered an ideal" (Sergiovanni, 1996, p.16). This approach to leadership can be used in colleges too - "In FE ... this style of leadership can be seen in some denominationally governed sixth form colleges" (Sawbridge, 2001, p.6). Fullan argues that moral leadership is of great importance as the strong relationships between people in education are vital – "relationships among people are at the very centre of the work of school administrators and teachers, and for this reason school leadership is, by its nature and focus, a moral activity" (Fullan, 2003, p.246). Leading by example is very much at the heart of this approach to leadership, as stated by Quick and Normore (2004) – "True leaders understand that their 'actions speak louder than words', and that they must 'practice what they preach' for inevitably they 'shall reap what they sow'" (p.346). This series of clichés could be seen as being lazy in their description of moral leadership. If this is the best that researchers can do when describing moral leadership then perhaps its credentials as a theory with utility is seen to be dubious. The question to address is who makes the important decision as to the moral position that is most effective in an organisation? Should it be the college governors, the principal, does it lie in the underlying culture of the institution (however that is measured) or does there need to be direction from local or national government? Sergiovanni (1984) states that "excellent schools have central zones composed of values and beliefs that take on sacred or cultural characteristics" (p.10) and so shows a belief that the moral leadership of an educational institution can influence the

whole function of that establishment. Bush and Glover (2003) point to the values and beliefs that are demonstrated by heads through their words and deeds. These were researched by Earley et al in 2002; investigating heads regarded as outstanding by OFSTED inspectors and are inclusivity, equal opportunities, equity or justice, high expectations, engagement with stakeholders, co-operation, teamwork, commitment, and understanding. This list does not throw up any surprises and it would be difficult to argue against any of the values and beliefs being important to a leader. Measurement of these beliefs and values could prove to be more difficult a proposition. However, this does not mean that they should be ignored and the research aims to ascertain what senior leaders of FE colleges perceive to be important in terms of morality. In relation to my research, there does not appear to be a need for a separate categorisation of moral leadership in my framework as values and beliefs can be addressed in the transformational leadership practice model.

#### **2.2.4 Participative leadership**

According to Leithwood et al (1999, p12): “participative leadership...assumes that the decision-making processes of the group ought to be the central focus of the group”. This type of leadership implies that there is a need for all members of the college community to participate in leading the organisation towards a common goal and that members all have an active role in the way in which the organisation is run. According to the theory, interaction between the many ‘leaders’ in an organisation is vital if this approach is to succeed. However, the term ‘participative leadership’ is problematic and confused. If it is not about delegation, but more to do with discussion and dialogue then as such has similar characteristics with collegial leadership. Collegial leadership can be participative in that all members of the college community are involved in leading. To avoid this confusion with terminology, this section will concentrate on the term distributed leadership rather than participative. This has been chosen as the preferred practice to review in this thesis as it is more likely to be evident in FE colleges than Bush and Glover’s participative categorisation which has school leadership as its focus. Participative leadership appears to be more suited to smaller institutions where it is more practical for all members of the community to actively participate in the

decision-making process. However, as with all the leadership approaches investigated in this review there are contested ideas of what constitutes distributed leadership. In a study into the leadership approaches of senior managers in FE and sixth form colleges, Lumby (2003, p.286) found that "...in intention, senior managers in both types of college support a style of leadership which is distributed" but carried on to say that "there was a deliberate approach to distributing leadership but it varied in intention" (Lumby, 2003, p.286). This showed itself in the variable responsibilities distributed to departmental heads, for example. Spillane (2005) also highlights this contention with the term stating that "it is often used interchangeably with 'shared leadership', 'team leadership' and democratic leadership" (p.143) but concluding that these approaches are not synonyms for distributed leadership. I have chosen to concentrate on distributed leadership as a preferred term for leadership that requires participation for the reason highlighted by Spillane (2005) – "distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines, and structures" (p.146). An exploration of leadership practice is at the heart of this thesis and distributed leadership focuses on interactions among leaders and followers and the situation they are in.

Other recent evidence put forward by Harris et al (2007), Leithwood et al (2007) and Spillane (2006) suggests that organisations can change and develop when undertaking distributed leadership as long as certain cultural and structural barriers are removed. Proponents of distributed leadership are keen to emphasize the "immediate resonance with practice" (Harris et al, 2007, p.345) that many other, more theoretical approaches lack. This approach to leadership has become more popular in educational settings as more power is divested to all layers of an establishment's hierarchy (Harris and Spillane, 2008). Advocates of this type of leadership highlight the improved teamwork, sense of worth for individuals, staff development opportunities, shared decision-making and the increased culture of co-operation that is in evidence when collegial leadership is in action (Harris and Spillane, 2008). Critics would argue that the strength of leadership can be diluted if spread too thinly, not all staff want leadership responsibilities (especially if there is no financial reward) and distributed leadership can take time to change an institution's culture.



Bush and Glover (2003) underline the fact that there is a continuing focus on participative and distributed leadership, bracketing the two theories together. As has been written and discussed throughout this review, there is a variety of ways in which researchers view distributed leadership. When referring to participative, which in their view is a form of distributed leadership, Bush and Glover also quote that Harris (2002) argues that “democratic leadership styles are inevitable in the complex and rapidly changing world inhabited by schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite the current emphasis on individual leaders” (Bush and Glover, 2003, p.9). However, this grouping of democratic and distributed leadership is challenged by Woods (2004) who argues that there are overlaps between the two but there are also differences. Woods states that distributed leadership “... empowers the many eyes, ears and brains in the organization, rather than the few” (Woods, 2004, p.5) and that “The idea of distributed leadership is seductive and has a high degree of plausibility” (Woods, 2004, p.5) but re-iterates the point that I have made elsewhere in the review that there are a variety of meanings attached to the notion of distributed leadership. In Woods’ opinion “distributed leadership is perhaps best conceived as an analytical- that is, predominantly descriptive-conception” (Woods, 2004, p.7). One of the ideas that emerge from this belief of Woods is that leadership is an emergent property – that is, it arises from a range of forms of co-ordination that give rise to concertive action where the sum is greater than the parts (Woods, 2004). This emergent character is what Woods believes is the shared attribute with democratic leadership. Woods states that “As with distributed leadership, democratic leadership is a dispersed activity in which initiative circulates widely. It is not limited to a single leader” (Woods, 2004, p.7). Where the two leadership practices differ is that, according to Woods, “... distributed leadership excludes leadership by a single leader, democratic leadership allows that initiative may be focused in a single person at certain times” (Woods, 2004, p.8). A further note of caution from Muijs et al (2006) stating that “distributed leadership should not, however, be confused with consultation, which some studies in further education have shown to be used more to communicate prior management decisions to staff than to involve them in decision making” (p.93). Spillane’s (2005) view of distributed leadership is that leadership is a shared, social process whereby intentional influence is

exerted by leaders and followers over other people to structure activities and relationships in a group of organisation. Spillane (2004) suggests that principals cannot be experts in all areas of an educational establishment and therefore distributing leadership plays to the strengths of the organisation. Spillane therefore depicts distributed leadership as collective, educative, causative and ethical allowing a lens to reflect on practice rather than "... prescribing a blueprint that defines and limits practice" (Harris and Spillane, 2008, p.33). Essential terms in making distributed leadership a workable practice is that principals do not hold tightly to power and control and that all staff are involved in the leadership of the institution, even those who do not support the agenda. Spillane's approach to distributed leadership is the one which I feel has more utility in this thesis as it encompasses contingent and situational leadership whilst relating to leadership practice. As is evident above, there is some commonality in the understanding of distributed leadership between Woods and Spillane in their agreement that this practice is collective and requires initiative to be shown throughout the establishment. Over time academics have changed their own views of distributed leadership and questioned its resonance and import. Gronn (2008) investigated the relevance and utility of distributed leadership given the volume and diversity of research carried out in the area over the previous decade. Gronn (2008) asserts that "distributed leadership is shown to be largely unremarkable" (p.142) but is convinced that "...distributed leadership displays a number of hallmarks of survival" (p.141). It has achieved a high level of theoretical and practical uptake (Gronn, 2008) demonstrating the continued interest in and utility of the model despite Gronn's misgivings. Distributed leadership continues to be researched and developed and will form an integral part of my research process.

It is apparent that distributed leadership is a descriptive concept rather than a prescriptive one. That is, it is a way of understanding what type of leadership is taking place in an institution rather than proposing a way of leading. As described by Harris and Spillane (2008) – "In a practical or normative sense, the chief concern is *how* leadership is distributed, by whom and with what effect" (p.32).

### **2.2.5 Managerial leadership**

According to Sawbridge “this model of leadership is predominant in the UK and is strongly evidenced in further education” (Sawbridge, 2000, p.4). The same author suggests that it is “sometimes referred to as transactional or functional” (Sawbridge, 2000, p.4) leadership. This is a contested standpoint, however, as there are clear differences between the three models and Sawbridge’s assertion is too simplistic a way of looking at the concepts in question. The “transactional leader is the catalyst for expectations, goals, and provision of recognition and rewards” (Burns, 1978, p.34). The transactional leader therefore rewards subordinates for their hard work in terms of financial incentives, an increase in status or praise. These are viewed as extrinsic motivators for the followers and these could be seen as resulting in minimal compliance rather than full commitment to the job by subordinates. The prime purpose of this type of leadership is for the subordinate to do what he or she is told rather use their own initiative. Critics of this approach to leadership consider there to be no regard for understanding human factors such as emotion and social factors. It could be seen as a negative way of leading in further education as the emphasis of the leader moves towards ‘through-put’ and ‘outcomes’ as evident in the work of Pollitt (1990). This contradicts the “professional paradigm” suggested by Randle and Brady (1997) where the emphasis is on ‘teaching and learning’ and ‘educational need’. However, this is perhaps too simplistic a distinction to make and further analysis is required.

It is argued by Pollitt (1990) that there is a generic package of management techniques that need to be implemented in the managerialism approach as indicated in table 2.3.

**Table 2.3: Pollitt's management techniques (1990, p.130)**

- Strict financial management and devolved budgetary controls;
- The efficient use of resources and emphasis on productivity;
- The extensive use of quantitative performance indicators;
- The development of consumerism and the discipline of the market;
- The manifestation of consumer charters as mechanisms for accountability;
- The creation of a disciplined, flexible workforce, using flexible/individualised contracts, staff appraisal systems and performance related pay;
- The assertion of managerial control and the managers' right to manage.

Given the perilous state of financial affairs that many further education colleges now find themselves in, it is difficult to take issue with the first two points. Measuring "efficient use of resources" in reality can be troublesome as there is an element of subjectivity to the process. Quantitative performance indicators have been used to ascertain examination success in educational establishments for many years and have been extended to include a multitude of information such as value added and staff to student ratios. Competition from other FE colleges, school sixth forms, sixth form colleges and work based apprenticeships means that an understanding of the market is crucial to offer the right variety of products to 'consumers'. This is argued to mean that staff need to be flexible to respond to market demand and that managers have some control over the situations they find themselves in. From a practical point of view in 2010/11, therefore, I believe that there is relevance in the managerial approach to leadership as outlined above (in terms of it being a description of what is going on in the sector), certainly at middle management level: The research carried out in this thesis has sought to ascertain its prevalence at senior level. However, the managerialist style of leadership has been seen by some researchers as a negative approach to leading in further education (Hartley, 1997; Randle and Brady, 1997). This is due to "...starkly drawn conflict between managers and lecturers" (Lumby and Tomlinson, 2000, p.139) which came to prominence following the incorporation of FE and HE as described earlier in the chapter. It has been argued that these changes led to

leaders becoming “a new type of manager in FE operating with an apparently different value system from that of the academic staff” (Randle and Brady 1997, p.135). The managerial leadership approach is also seen as undermining the professionalism of lecturers. Avis et al (2000, p.110) argue that “managerialism represents a shift in the relations of power between professionals and managers with the latter being placed in a dominant position” suggesting that lecturers have less choice and impact over what they can do.

However, it could be argued that the ethos of collaboration within today’s FE organisations as well as with outside bodies such as other educational providers, as evident in the proposed 14-19 diploma qualifications where collaboration is key to their success, lends itself to the managerial leadership approaches in its drive towards what Randle and Brady (1997, p.125) call the “three E’s of economy, efficiency and effectiveness in public services”. Structures have become flatter and leaner since the incorporation of Further Education colleges (Harper, 2000) and so it is possible that interaction between the various levels of the establishment may be more effective when followers are given clear direction by their leaders. There is an assumption that the behaviour of organisational members is largely rational and the emphasis on this approach is on teams and team working based on strong leadership direction. The role of leadership is strongly associated with the team leader and there is an emphasis on individual leadership training and skills development rather than developing wider distributed leadership capability across the organisation. Muijs et al (2006) believe that even though the distinction between this type of leadership and transformational leadership seems to be stark on paper, in reality the difference is less clean cut.

Although much of the research into the area of managerialism was carried out in the late 1990s perhaps mirroring the view that “the year 1996 could...be seen as the time when managerialist values and actions were at their height” (Lumby and Tomlinson, 2000, p.140), the thesis has attempted to ascertain if it is still a prominent feature of FE leadership in 2010/11.

I believe that this approach to leadership cannot be ignored in an FE context and therefore this type of leadership practice has been incorporated into my

framework. The thesis investigates the validity of the statement from Sawbridge (2001, p.15) that “although there are exceptions, leadership in FE colleges in the UK largely conforms to a managerial or functional model”.

### **2.2.6 Post-modern leadership**

Bush and Glover (2003) have included this aspect of leadership in their typology based on the notion that it is imperative to be flexible in one’s approach to leadership in today’s educational parameters. Keough and Tobin (2001) put forward the importance of this approach by stating that “the rudimentary tenets of the postmodern lexicon exist in policy structures and are manifested in the policy lexicon of colleges” (p.2). They go on to link post-modern leadership to educational policy “current postmodern culture celebrates the multiplicity of subjective truths as defined by experience and revels in the loss of absolute authority” (Keough and Tobin, 2001, p.4). The crux of this approach is that there is a need for leaders to be reflexive, to constantly adapt what they do, but it does mean that defining the post-modern leader becomes very difficult. Bush and Glover (2003) see the value in this type of leadership in recognising that “leaders should respect, and give attention to, the diverse and individual perspectives of stakeholders” (p.10). They also point out that leaders should “avoid reliance on the hierarchy because this concept has little meaning in such a fluid organisation” (Bush and Glover, 2003, p.10). These comments along with consideration of Keough and Tobin’s (2001) key features of post-modernism such as “language does not reflect reality”, “reality does not exist; there are multiple realities”, “any situation is open to multiple interpretations” and “situations must be understood at local level with particular attention to diversity” (p.4) lead me to the conclusion that using this approach to leadership in my thesis is not practical. The understanding of an FE college where there is a hyper-reality, that is reality does not exist, it is an illusion, is not particularly helpful. It could be argued that post-modernism is really to do with human activity rather than it being a type of leadership. Keough and Tobin (2001) suggest that “post-modern theory assumes the demise of authority figures” (p.5) and so questions the effectiveness of such a style of leadership where the leader is not recognised and could be described as a anarchic or chaotic leadership approach. Therefore, post-modernism is extremely complex and is not

particularly helpful in recognising leadership practice in FE leaders. There are too many unanswerable questions and the difficulties are summed up by Keough and Tobin (2001) – “For the administrator and the leader within a post-modern institution, nothing is inherently stable – not even the institutional hyper-reality itself” (p.7). The method by which the data will be collected in this study means that a clear structure is required to enable leadership types to be identified in a straightforward manner. The abstract nature of the post-modern leadership theory does not, in my opinion, allow this to take place. This take on post-modern leadership reflects my ontological and epistemological position which will be addressed in the methodology section of this thesis.

### **2.2.7 Interpersonal leadership**

This approach to leadership deals with the importance of collaboration and interpersonal relationships. West-Burnham (2001) states that “interpersonal intelligence is the authentic range of intuitive behaviours derived from sophisticated self-awareness, which facilitates effective engagement with others” (p.2). As such this type of leadership has some commonality with the post-modern position, as described previously, in that reflexivity is of importance when displaying leadership skills. This approach can be used in relation to leadership at all levels of the organisation as interpersonal skills are constantly required – “much of the teachers’ day is taken up in an intensity of relationships. Understanding the changing nature of relationships with young students, the changing context of their lives, and developing appropriate and effective responses to both their personal and academic needs requires constant reflection and adjustment” (Tuohy and Coghlan 1997, p.69). According to West-Burnham (2001), “the relationships that exist in our schools make everything happen...or otherwise” (p.3). Bush and Glover (2003) agree that interpersonal skills are very important in ensuring leadership is effective in an educational setting and suggest that “these pressures are even more evident in the work of school leaders and suggests a requirement for high level personal and interpersonal skills” (Bush and Glover, 2003, p.11). I view interpersonal skills as an essential element required for those exhibiting a transformational style of leadership rather than interpersonal leadership being a type of leadership in its own right. Interpersonal skills are indeed vital in all approaches to leadership; however transformational leaders require their

followers to gain trust and respect through displaying interpersonal qualities such as effective communication.

### **2.2.8 Contingent leadership**

This method of classifying leadership works on the assumption that specific situations require different styles of leadership. According to this approach, the dictator or autocratic style may be appropriate in times of crisis, for example, in the build up to an Ofsted inspection where there may be a short lead in time where a firm approach could be seen to be the most effective. The approach would not necessarily be one to adopt on a more long term basis. The democratic style could be used where a consensus of opinion is beneficial to the group such as curriculum development. A laissez faire approach is more appropriate in situations where a degree of freedom is appreciated such as teaching methods. The contingency leadership approach refers to "...a theory of formal leadership that uses the interaction of leader personality...and situational favourability...to predict effective and ineffective leaders" (House and Baetz, 1979, p.380). There are a number of well-known contingency models, the first and most renowned of which is Fielder's contingency theory. This model puts forward the notion that leaders are either task or relations oriented and there is a need to understand the leader's personality and way in which he or she deals with situations that arise. This will help to determine the most effective way of improving leadership by putting the right people into the right leadership roles. The main considerations of the contingency approach to leadership are the relationship between the leaders and followers, the structure of the task and the power the position holder is conferred. It is evident that a high degree of flexibility is required for a leader to be effective in all approaches to leadership. Bush and Glover (2003) explain that the other seven types of leadership in their model are partial, that they "provide valid and helpful insights into one particular aspect of leadership" (p.11). They see contingent leadership as an alternative approach which recognises "the diverse nature of school contexts and the advantages of adapting leadership styles to the particular situation" (Bush and Glover, 2003, p.11). This approach is important to recognise as being useful in an FE context, where change is the norm and flexibility is vital. It is clear that to understand how a leader is leading there is no one answer.



### 2.2.9 Conclusion – leadership and leadership practice

The purpose of this section of the literature review is to critique the typology for leadership as proposed by Bush and Glover (2003), to comment on its utility for the research to be undertaken in this thesis and to make adaptations to it for the purpose of the thesis. As stated in this review I have researched leadership practice when investigating the senior management of further education colleges, so a practical and efficient framework is required to allow this to happen. Bush and Glover (2003) themselves understand the limitations of their work into the types of leadership they have studied as there are “... artificial distinctions in that most successful leaders are likely to embody most or all of these approaches in their work” (Bush and Glover, 2003, p.12). The typology, as discussed elsewhere in this review, includes a number of leadership approaches that are contested and flawed. However, these writers recognise, as do I, that it is useful to provide a normative framework from which to identify leadership practices. A suggested framework for leadership practice in the further education sector is shown in table 2.4 below:

**Table 2.4: Framework for Leadership Practice in Further Education  
(adapted from Bush and Glover (2003))**

- |  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Transformational Leadership</li><li>• Distributed Leadership</li><li>• Managerial Leadership</li></ul> |
|--|

This framework takes into account the relative merits of those types of leadership described by Bush and Glover (2003) and condenses the number down to three for a number of reasons. Firstly, instructional leadership has been removed as a separate entity. This is due to the nature of the leadership being researched in this thesis, that is, senior leaders. Instructional leadership, on the whole, is seen by researchers as being more prevalent at middle management level. The changing context of education and society in general, leads away from instructional leadership to a more distributed approach. Secondly, moral leadership has also been removed as a practice in this framework as the focus is very much on the leader in terms of their values,

beliefs and attitudes. With the educational and professional background of the leader forming such a part of the thesis this is an important area to consider but values and beliefs can be considered in the transformational leadership model. Thirdly, I have replaced participative leadership with distributed leadership. This tends to be the preferred term in the educational research arena and includes the team approach to decision making that is a vital component in the participative leadership type. Fourthly, managerial leadership has been retained as its outcome driven nature sits well in the current further education climate of competition and efficiency. A fifth point is that post-modern and interpersonal types of leadership have been removed. Post-modern leadership is too abstract a concept for the study and the flexible and reflexive nature of this style can be taken into account in the contingent leadership practice approach. Interpersonal leadership is an important aspect of transformational leadership but does not in my view require a special categorisation. Finally, contingent leadership is removed as although there is a need for leaders to display a range of styles to adapt their approach depending on the situation, this can be accounted for in the transformational leadership model. To develop the synthesis of my framework I would like to consider the nature of the relations of the three leadership practices in evidence.

In basic terms, the transformational leader holds power over their followers as the leader's values and attitudes influence how they attempt to inspire the individuals they lead. Depending on the distributed leadership model used, there is potentially more emphasis given to the power of followers rather than it being one heroic figurehead in charge of the organisation's direction. The managerial leadership model is arguably the practice that allows the leader the most power as directions are very much of a top down nature. This analysis will be developed further in the methodology section of the thesis.

## **2.3 Educational and Professional Background**

This section of the review explores the existing literature concerning any influence that the educational and professional background of leaders may have on the way in which they lead. As my area of interest seeks to fill a gap in existing research, there is difficulty in finding the 'way in' to comparable literature. A large proportion of existing research that has already been drawn upon focuses on schools or Higher Education. As is often the case, Further Education is an area of neglect in educational research, the "Cinderella service" (Randle and Brady, 1997, p.121). It is therefore necessary to utilise and adapt research from other sectors of education. I have identified three existing fields of research that have relevance to my area of interest. Firstly, I will concentrate on the research regarding the impact of academic discipline on those working in Higher Education. Secondly, I will focus on the studies into the relationships between diversity, identity and leadership to ascertain if any links have already been made between leadership practice and an individual's background. Thirdly, I will investigate the research that has taken place that has involved interviewing leaders in Further Education and examine that which is relevant to educational and professional background. Each aspect of my field of interest is covered with this approach; it is then my aim to bring them together to form a cohesive framework from which to work.

### **2.3.1 The impact of academic discipline on leadership in HE**

There has been research carried out with regard to the way in which a member of staff's academic discipline affects the way in which they work in HE institutions which has some resonance in this thesis. Research carried out by Becher in 1989 (updated in 2001) focused on the nature of disciplines in higher education and the way in which the staff in these disciplines carry out their day to day business and how they communicate with others in the HE community. Whilst not strictly relating to leadership, and certainly not designed specifically with further education in mind, there are areas of the research that can be adapted and taken into account for this thesis with particular reference to the influence of educational background on leadership practice. Becher and Trowler (2001) call the academic groups 'tribes' and categorise the disciplines into four groupings. These are summarised in Table 2.5:

**Table 2.5: Knowledge and disciplinary groupings (Becher and Trowler, 2001, p.36)**

| Disciplinary groupings  | Nature of knowledge   |
|---|---|
| Pure sciences (e.g. physics):<br><b>‘hard-pure’</b>   | Cumulative; concerned with universals, quantities, simplification; impersonal, value-free; results in discovery/explanation                         |
| Humanities (e.g. history) and pure social sciences (e.g. anthropology):<br><b>‘soft-pure’</b> | Reiterative; concerned with particulars, qualities, complication; personal, value-laden; results in understanding/interpretation                    |
| Technologies (e.g. mechanical engineering): <b>‘hard-applied’</b>                             | Purposive; pragmatic (know-how via hard knowledge); uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches; results in products/techniques               |
| Applied social science (e.g. law):<br><b>‘soft-applied’</b>                                   | Functional; utilitarian (know-how via soft knowledge); concerned with enhancement of [semi-] professional practice; results in protocols/procedures |

Table 2.5 was drawn up in relation to higher education and has some utility in the further education arena. However, to be of greater use in this study, some adaptation to Becher and Trowler’s table would be beneficial. This is shown in Table 2.6.

**Table 2.6: Vocational/Disciplinary groupings and FE courses (adapted from Becher and Trowler, 2001, p.36)**

| Vocational groupings  | FE courses (examples)  |
|---|--|
| Pure sciences (e.g. physics):<br><b>‘hard-pure’</b>   | Astrophysics, Biology, Chemistry, Physics  |
| Humanities (e.g. history) and pure social sciences (e.g. anthropology):<br><b>‘soft-pure’</b> | Archaeology, Economics, Environmental studies, Geography, History, Politics, Psychology, Sociology                             |
| Technologies (e.g. mechanical engineering): <b>‘hard-applied’</b>                             | Applied Science, Electronics, Engineering  |
| Applied social science (e.g. law):<br><b>‘soft-applied’</b>                                   | Law, Teacher Training  |
| ‘New’ Academic Disciplines<br><b>‘vocational-applied’</b>                                     | Beauty Therapy, Carpentry, Health and Social Care, Horticulture, Leisure Studies, Plumbing, Sports Studies, Travel and Tourism |

By looking through the provision of courses offered by FE institutions, it was evident that courses such as beauty therapy and leisure studies did not sit comfortably in Becher’s groupings. In the adapted table, these have their own grouping called “vocational-applied”. These are typically the subjects referred to as ‘tertiary’ which are seldom offered at HE institutions.

Categorising disciplines into groups in this way to investigate leadership practice was not Becher’s intention, but in this adapted table, could be a useful approach for the design of research in this thesis. Will the discipline from which the FE leaders originate have an effect on the leadership practice they display? How will this be evident? Will the leaders be aware of any link between disciplinary/vocational grouping and leadership practice? – these are the questions that have been addressed. It is also important, if this approach is to be used, that the groupings are very clear. Bath and Smith (2004) warn

that "...the traditional disciplines are currently experiencing, through increasing specialisation, and occasionally the hybridisation of some areas of study, what... has [been] described as the 'fragmentation' of higher education" (p.13). This has been the case to a lesser extent in further education with the growth of such disciplines as travel and tourism and media/film studies. Becher and Trowler also report on the movement towards managerialism within university institutions which, it is argued means that "the result has been to shift focus away from academic department in terms of initiatives and to impose greater scrutiny of the department's documents, practices and policies from the centre" (Becher and Trowler, 2001, p.11). If this is an area that Becher and Trowler saw as changing the way in which HE was led in 2001, it has been interesting to see what is happening nearly a decade on in FE when, it could be argued that, and has been suggested earlier in this literature review, the managerialist approach to leadership has been more prevalent.

I have sought to find if a perceived link exists between vocational/disciplinary grouping and the leadership practice that is displayed by FE principals. This could be seen to be troublesome as I am relying on the principals' perceptions of their leadership practice. However, it is worth consideration in this section. For example, I may find that those principals from the vocational grouping 'hard-pure' display managerial leadership as the disciplinary culture of this group is well-organized...task-oriented (Becher, 1987) suiting this leadership practice. It is possible that managerial leadership may be shown in the 'soft-applied' disciplinary grouping. This leadership practice suits the functional nature of knowledge that results in protocols/procedures (Becher, 1987). I would suggest that principals falling into the 'soft-pure' grouping are most likely to practice transformational leadership as Becher suggests the culture in such groups will be person-oriented and loosely structured. The 'hard-applied' grouping is described by Becher as having an "entrepreneurial...role oriented" culture lending itself to being suited to a distributed leader where individuals have the ability to use their own initiative. Those principals who come from a background that I have described as 'vocational-applied' may display a range of leadership practices as there is great variation in the disciplines falling in to this classification. This conjecture and caution highlights the need for this

research to ascertain the perceived link, if any, between educational and professional background and leadership practice in further education.

### **2.3.2 Diversity, identity and leadership**

There is a plethora of research on diversity in educational leadership and it would be imprudent at this point to get embroiled in the complexities of the variety of studies that have taken place. It is vital that the areas investigated focus on the educational and professional background aspects of diversity and identity. Diversity encompasses a great deal more than educational and professional background including such characteristics as ethnicity, age, disability, lifestyle, beliefs, economic status and gender. In their study from 2007, Morrison et al collected data from a number of individual leaders of further education and sixth-form colleges who were minorities within their leadership groups in terms of a number of factors including education/professional background. As this research process investigated a very complex area of education the findings are only of partial relevance to my smaller scale, alternatively focussed study. However, a number of interesting points emerge. The research concluded that “at every level of leadership the term diversity is understood in a variety of ways” (Morrison et al, 2007, p.35) indicating that by honing in on two elements of diversity and identity, I should have a good chance of ensuring my research is manageable and worthwhile. The research also found that leaders behave differently in different situations, relating back to the contingency model of leadership practice. In addition the study concluded that people wishing to lead in these colleges may have to suppress any characteristics particular to their minority in order to become leaders. This aspect of leadership has been investigated in my study as I sought to ascertain how leaders lead and whether they perceive that professional or educational background has influenced this behaviour. When assessing both the narrow and broad definitions of diversity, it is apparent that many researchers approach diversity from a negative perspective. That is, what people from diverse backgrounds can do to ‘overcome’ the potential difficulties they may encounter. I was interested in approaching diversity from a more positive angle. My selected criteria of educational and professional background aim to investigate how these aspects of diversity have influenced leadership practice. The research by Morrison et al (2007) also found that “...

awareness of one's self and own identity provides a starting point" to senior leaders being able to "...challenge the status quo of which they are part" (p.36). So for my research I was interested in finding out how senior leaders perceive themselves and whether this has been influenced by their professional and educational background. Morrison et al (2007) effectively highlight the complexities of both leadership and diversity and, to a lesser extent, identity.

Identity is the way in which people see themselves and others and can be seen as the basis of power and influence at work (Gurin and Nagda, 2006). This broad sweeping statement would benefit from being unpacked. Briggs (2007) concentrated her research on the professional identities of middle leaders in further education colleges which encompassed some interviews with senior leaders in the sector. The research indicates that there is a wide range of professional identities in evidence in each college researched. Identity is a complex area as individuals may have multiple identities depending on the environment they find themselves in. For example, in the work environment, one could have a place within a college department (social identity), a role within the department (role identity) and could also have unique biological entities (personal identity) (Burke et al, 2003, p.196). Further identities will exist outside the work environment regarding relationships with family and friends. The importance of identity when investigating leadership practice has been recognised by Komives et al (2005 & 2006) when developing their Leadership Identity Development Model. Komives et al (2006) state that "identity may...be applied to the process of leadership and how one comes to adopt a leadership identity" (p.403). The same writers found that there are five categories that influenced the development of a leadership identity, these are "broadening view of leadership, developing self, group influences, developmental influences, and the changing view of self with others" (Komives et al, 2006, p.405). The developmental influences could come from the educational and professional background of the leaders. The literature appears to show a link between background and identity and identity and leadership practice. It could be tentatively suggested that identity is a mediatory phenomenon between educational and professional background and leadership practice. Komives et al (2006) also suggest that "Identity



development is connected to the changing nature of relationships with others” (p.404). This development of identity could have taken place in the preceding career of the leader in either a professional or educational setting. In other words, my understanding of identity is that it is influenced by looking backwards and looking forwards. By looking backwards, a leader’s identity has developed over time based, partially at least, on where and what they have studied, where they have worked and in what capacity, and how their leaders have behaved. By looking forwards, leaders may modify their identity (and therefore their leadership practice) in an educational establishment based on how they wish to be perceived by others, whether they feel the way they lead will get the best out of others and so forth. It is important in this study to understand the perceptions of FE principals’ identity to ascertain if there is a link between educational and professional background and leadership practice.

### **2.3.3 Further Education leaders’ interviews**

Leaders in further education have been interviewed for a variety of reasons, some of which help to give an understanding as to how their educational and professional background has influenced the way in which they lead. For example, when interviewing eight principals to investigate managerialism and leadership in further education, Lumby and Tomlinson (2000) found that “three of the eight principals came from a background of ‘failed’ education” (p.141), others had worked in different sectors such as schools, adult education and higher education. The study reported that the principals’ experience of education had influenced “...their commitment to students and to further education” (p.141). This link suggested by the research is one that I have examined for existence, albeit using a different methodological approach in my research. Lumby and Tomlinson’s (2000) research also found that many of the principals interviewed, whilst recognising the importance of funding, did not see money as their primary focus. I suspect that this is a rather idealistic vision of leading an FE college and that, ten years on, those principals will have a more business like approach to FE college leadership. Much of the remainder of Lumby and Tomlinson’s (2000) research did not return to the consideration of principals’ background but concluded that it is important not to generalise about senior leaders as there is a range of human behaviours and

college environments to take into account. This ten year old study touches on the background of senior leaders and the influence this has on leadership practice which suggests that the subject area I am researching is one that is worth pursuing.

Although not concentrating solely on senior leaders in further education, Gleeson et al (2005) interviewed practitioners in the sector in relation to professionalism. The main area of interest in relation to my thesis is that there is a recurring theme regarding the backgrounds of those working in the FE sector. That is, according to Gleeson et al (2005), "...entering FE is, for many, less a career choice or pathway than an opportunity at a particular moment in time" (p.456). This research suggests that the educational and professional background of those working in FE is extremely diverse as is the way in which these backgrounds have an effect on practice in the sector. This diversity of background is of course central to this thesis in the way that it may affect leadership practice. As in the case of the study by Lumby and Tomlinson (2000), the research offers some encouragement that background will have an affect on leadership practice. Hannagan et al (2007) suggest in their research into management of change in the FE sector that there is a need for colleges to ensure that there is a range of backgrounds at senior management level. This has allowed leaders to make the changes necessary to run colleges in a way more akin to profit-making private sector organisations where efficiency and effectiveness are key foci of success. This is seen by Hannagan et al (2007) as "...a transition from controllers to leaders" (p.495) which these researchers see as imperative if colleges are to have the vision and skills to respond to the ever-changing FE environment. As stated earlier in this section, I have researched a very narrow definition (just two aspects) of diversity, which is in relation to professional and educational background. In interviewing leaders at five FE and sixth form colleges, Morrison et al (2007) discovered the variety of definitions of diversity amongst respondents. One leader commented that in the management of their organisation "... everyone is from a similar background, and everyone has a similar education" (p.20). What I have endeavoured to discover is whether those leaders that I find from similar backgrounds display similar leadership practices and if the two are connected from the principals' perspectives. A recent study by Gibney et al

(2009) reports that FE College Principals are being stretched beyond their core learning and skills role going on to comment on the need for more support from within the sector. This is a significant leadership challenge according to Gibney et al (2009). It is crucial that my research gives an understanding as to how professional and educational background can influence leadership practice to cope with this challenge. The literature reviewed in this section of the thesis touches on some of the areas that will be researched. The research continues to show the complex nature of the exploration of leadership practice in education.

#### **2.3.4 Conclusion – influence of educational and professional background on leadership**

It is clear that there is little to draw from when reviewing literature on the influence of educational and professional background on leadership. However, it is also apparent that there are areas that can be developed and moulded to create a framework from which to research the influence that educational and professional background have on leadership practice in further education. Studies on the impact of academic discipline provide a method of categorization which could prove to be useful in this thesis. The use of the terms 'hard-pure', 'soft-pure', 'hard-applied' and 'soft-applied' can be used to group senior FE leaders into categories regarding both their educational discipline and professional area of expertise. For example, a senior leader who studied physics at university or worked outside education in a science-related discipline could be categorised in the 'hard-pure' grouping. From this my research has attempted to investigate the existence of any link between the leader's 'hard-pure' background and the way in which they lead – is their leadership practice impersonal and with no particular values, as suggested by Becher's (1994) groupings? Does this suggest a particular leadership practice such as the managerialist approach? This framework would allow a link between the disciplinary background of the leader and the way in which they lead to be sought. The addition of the "vocational-applied" grouping is my attempt to modify Becher's approach to improve the utility of the model in an FE environment. The studies on diversity and identity highlight the difficulty in linking individual's practice to the place from which they come. I have only hoped to gauge leaders' perceptions of their identity based on their

educational and professional backgrounds. The research carried out by Lumby and Tomlinson (2000) touches on the educational background of principals in the further education sector. Although the study by Gibney et al (2009) did not delve into the backgrounds of FE leaders, it does highlight the need for multiple skills in the sector which may be influenced by background and the importance of a whole team approach to leadership to ensure all skills are utilised effectively across the institution. I have investigated the educational background and its effect, if any, on leadership practice. A framework to be used as a starting point is the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which can be found in Appendix A of this thesis. The framework details the levels which have been assigned to qualifications from entry level such as skills for life qualifications to level eight (doctorates). College principals will be asked the level at which their highest qualification has been achieved. Principals will also be asked whether they studied through the traditional route of school, (college), university then employment or whether there were gaps in education or any part-time study took place. This insight into the educational background 'identity' of the leaders, along with the information regarding their disciplinary grouping gave a picture of the individual which could help understand the way in which the leaders practice their leadership.

## **2.4 Conclusion – literature review**

This review of the literature has been divided into two sections. The first section examined leadership and leadership practice. By concentrating on the work of Bush and Glover (2003), the review is both manageable and focused. The framework drawn up for use in this study into leadership in the further education sector (table 2.4) highlights the three types of leadership practice that will be investigated, namely transformational, distributed and managerial. The second section of the chapter reviews the literature on the educational and professional background of leaders. The section suggests that the work of Becher and Trowler (2001) can be adapted to fulfil the needs of this study and that identity is an important element in understanding the influence of background on leadership practice in further education.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter concerns the process by which the research methodology was chosen to enable the research aims to be investigated. There are a number of sections to describe the overall purpose of the research, the philosophical approach to the research, the research methodology and the instruments and methods used.

The conceptual frameworks that have emerged from the literature review adapted from Bush and Glover (2003) and Becher and Trowler (2001) rely on obtaining data from a wide range of FE college principals. This data sought to establish principals' educational and professional backgrounds and perceptions of the leadership practice that they display. The literature review highlighted the difficulty in defining leadership and leadership practice and the challenges of establishing a theoretical link between an individual's background and their perceived leadership practice. The review of the literature distilled the extensive leadership research into the three leadership practices of transformational, distributed and managerial in an attempt to ensure that the thesis was of manageable proportions. This allowed a sharper focus on ascertaining any link between a principal's background and the leadership they perceive that they practice. The instruments by which this data was collected were devised by revisiting the research aims posed at the beginning of the thesis. These aims, as stated in the introductory chapter of the thesis, provided the context for the discussion regarding research design in this chapter.

My research aims seek to:

- Investigate the educational backgrounds of FE leaders
- Investigate the professional backgrounds of FE leaders
- Explore the leadership styles of FE leaders
- Analyse the relationship between FE leaders' backgrounds and their leadership styles

In deciding on an appropriate research strategy and method it was essential to identify what sort of data needed to be gathered and what options were available for collecting and analysing the data. The philosophical approach that has been taken in the research was also important to consider as was the issue of ethics.

### **3.2 Ontological position**

It was vital that the ontological position taken in this thesis was considered before the research was designed and ethical considerations were investigated. The ontological approach taken influenced the method by which data was collected in aiming to fulfil the research purpose. This chapter aims to explain the ontology that shaped this thesis by looking at the alternative approaches that could have been taken and showing why the chosen approach is that which it was felt best suited the research.

Positivism was first proposed as a philosophical position in the nineteenth-century by French philosopher, Auguste Comte (Cohen et al, 2000). The purpose of such an approach was to base philosophy only on those aspects of existence which could be perceived directly, could be measured or could be proven by measurement or from perception (Giddens, 1987; Guba, 1990; Harre, 1981).

A positivist philosophy holds that scientific method and language are used to investigate human experience and ensure that research is free of values, beliefs, passions and the ideologies of the researcher. Positivism is seen as a way to get to the truth and to understand the world well enough to predict it (Trochim, 2000). According to Ryan (2006), "positivism...is still the dominant public model for research" (p.17). It appeared that a positivist ontological position suited the first part of my mixed method approach to this research in that the information I have gathered was by means of an internet survey where responses were seemingly straightforward. However, positivism has its critics and is seen as being inadequate in dealing with issues that are not dualistic; that is issues where there is no easy division of conclusions, no black/white answers. There is further criticism of positivism in that it is a philosophy that does not recognise that there is an element of social construction in the

divisions between subjectivity and objectivity, between public and private knowledge and between scientific and emotional knowledge (Ryan, 2006). It has been debated by writers such as Hirschheim (1992) that a positivist paradigm is not entirely suitable for the social sciences. The epistemological approach on which a positivist philosophy is based requires the methodology to be objective, empirical and scientific. Total objectivity could be problematic when attempting to ascertain principals' perceptions of their approach to leadership where their subjectivity is likely to play a part. This was an issue in both the internet survey and interview elements of this research as the respondents' objectivity was difficult to assess. Positivism also largely denies the relationship between the self and knowledge (Ryan, 2006) meaning that knowledge is regarded as being separate from the person who has constructed it. Many writers (such as Habermas, 1971 and Wittgenstein, 1974) have questioned the use of positivism in that "...it fails to take into account of our unique ability to interpret our experiences and represent them to ourselves" (Cohen et al, 2000, p.19). Cohen et al (2000) also state that the findings of positivistic social science are said to be "...so banal and trivial that they are of little consequence to those for whom they are intended, namely, teachers..." (p.19).

Habermas (1971) also argue that positivism "...silences an important debate about values, informed opinion, moral judgements and beliefs" (Cohen et al, 2000, p.19). A decision was made to rule out a positivist ontological approach to this study for the reasons outlined above.

These concerns and criticisms of positivism contributed to the movement towards a post-positivist philosophy as "knowledge cannot be divorced from ontology (being) and personal experience" (Ryan, 2006, p.16). According to Guba and Lincoln (1998), post-positivism is based on the concept of "critical multiplism" (p.205), which is a form of triangulation that aims to falsify hypotheses. Knowledge is sought through the use of various research methods and instruments which may include both quantitative and qualitative methods (Guba and Lincoln, 1998, p.193). This mirrors the post-positivist values as described by Ryan (2006) as "...not being either subjective or objective, nor do they prefer subjectivity over objectivity. They emphasise multiplicity as hallmarks of humanity" (p.16). In relation to ethical

considerations, the same writers suggest that post-positivism has an “emphasis...on good principles, adequate for working with human participants in all their complexity” (p.17). The post-positivist philosophical approach was the approach taken in this thesis as it allowed the researcher to find out basic research evidence from quantitative data as well as to focus in depth on qualitative data through interviewing a much smaller number of principals. Post-positivist researchers also inquire in a way that appears to be appropriate to this study in that they “...believe in multiple perspectives from participants rather than a single reality” (Creswell, 2007, p.20) indicating the need to take into account the self-reported nature of the principals’ responses. Post-positivism, as is the case with all ontological positions, is problematic and complex.

A post-positivist approach aims to address issues such as the inconsistencies of positivism (e.g. and aims to investigate the implications of assuming that reality is not an objective phenomenon (Guba, 1990; Harre, 1981)).

Post-positivism has been used in many ways and given different names such as neo-positivism (Popper, 1973) and perspectives such as existentialism, phenomenology and structuralism that reject positivism (Guba, 1990).

A post-positivist approach to this study allowed the researcher to explore issues that were not necessarily expected at the outset but were of importance when considering the conclusions drawn.



### 3.3 Epistemological position

The research aims outlined in the introduction to this chapter relate to ascertaining an understanding of the background of the FE Principals in terms of their education and work history. The research also aimed to ascertain the leadership practice the Principals perceive they undertake. It is important to note that it is the perception by the Principals themselves which were considered when analysing the results of the data collected. The self-reported nature of the data collected means that there was a need to take responses given by the participants at face value despite there being objections to self-report studies as highlighted by writers such as Spector (1994). Spector (1994) suggested that the use of self-report can be justified where it would be difficult for an alternative method to gather the required information. Spector (1994) also suggested that “using multiple methods...can also expand the confidence with which conclusions can be drawn from a set of data” (p.387), suggesting that a mixed method approach can be used in conjunction with self-reporting data collection as used in this study. Spector (1994) concludes that despite some criticism of using a self-report methodology, it can be “...useful in providing a picture of how people feel about and view their jobs” (p.390). The picture drawn in this thesis was the participants’ views on their leadership practice and its influences.

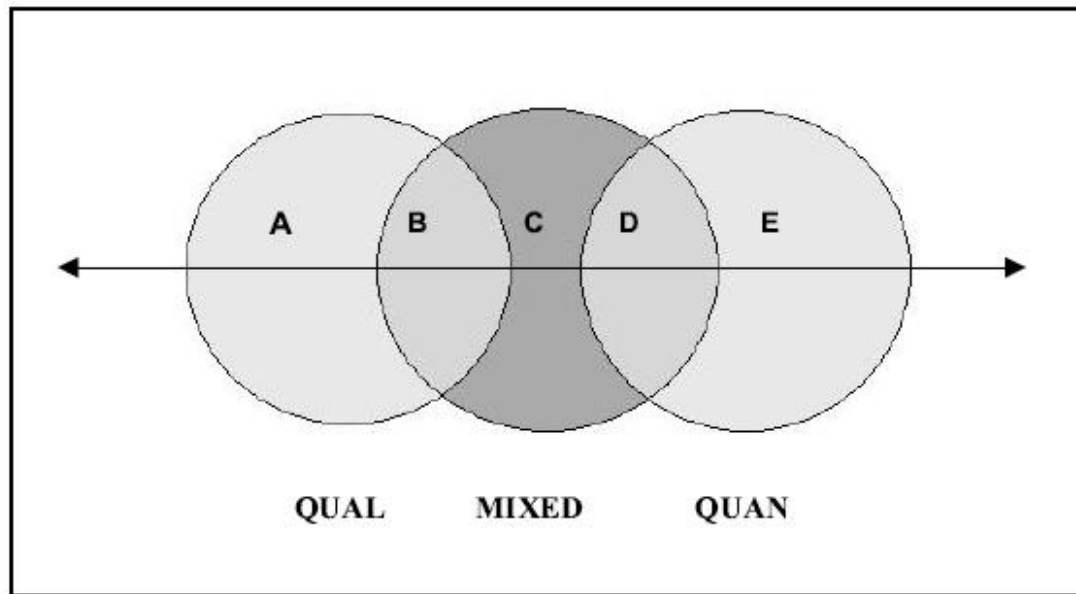
There was an attempt to identify any links that may exist between leadership background and leadership practice in Further Education colleges. The first three aims are descriptive in nature and therefore lend themselves to collection of factual data through the use of a survey. The data collected from the research undertaken was a mixture of factual data, such as qualifications gained and jobs undertaken, and principals’ views such as their perception of their leadership practice. The fourth aim concerned identifying a perceived link between the three preceding aims and required a qualitative approach by investigating in depth a much smaller sample size of principals. This quest for perceived links or connections lent itself to a mixed method approach (Teddle, 2005) requiring further analysis. A mixed method research strategy in this study followed the chosen philosophical approach in that the post-positivist researcher recognises that “social structures and phenomena are experienced and understood at the level of the individual subjectivity, and expressed in

stories about lives” (Ryan, 2006, p.24). In other words, it was difficult to understand and draw conclusions from data about principals’ perceptions of their leadership without interviewing and “...seeing the person, experience and knowledge as ‘multiple, relational and not bounded by reason’” (Henriques et al, 1998, p.xviii).

Teddlie (2005) identifies the three methodological approaches as briefly mentioned above. These are qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods. Denscombe (2007) states that “a number of different names have been given to mixed method strategies” (p.108) such as ‘mixed methodology’, ‘multi-strategy research’, ‘integrated methods’, ‘multi-method research’ and ‘combined method’ research but concludes that “... the term mixed methods has come to be used in a general sense to cover the spectrum of ways in which mixing can occur in the research process” (p.108). This common sense approach to the use of the terminology is one that was adopted in this study.

Figure 3.1 identifies a way of categorising the three methodological approaches in graphic form:

**Figure 3.1 – The QUAL-MIXED-QUAN continuum (Teddle, 2005, p212)**



This continuum emphasises the “...contrast, and often conflict, between two approaches, the quantitative and qualitative” (Bridges and Smith, 2007, p.107) that has led to what Teddlie (2005) refers to as the “incompatibility thesis”.

This thesis posits that researchers should not use both qualitative and quantitative methods in their projects as they are incompatible. It is suggested by Teddlie (2005) and others such as Creswell (2003) and Patton (2002) that a compatibility thesis (i.e. a mixed methods approach) can be adopted and this is shown on the continuum in Zone C. Where a mixed method approach is taken with more emphasis on either qualitative or quantitative research the continuum illustrates this as Zone B or Zone D respectively.

It has been stated that a quantitative approach to tackle the first two research aims appeared to be the most suitable. In particular, a survey appeared to be preferable. There were a number of reasons for this assertion. Firstly, the data required was straightforward information that required analysis to produce basic descriptive statistics, e.g. where principals studied; their occupational background. Secondly, a wide and inclusive coverage was required to ensure that as many college principals as possible were researched. Quantitative

research, in particular the use of surveys, enabled a breadth of coverage and more likelihood of obtaining data based on a representative sample (Denscombe, 2007). This, in turn, allowed the researcher to make generalised statements which were credible as there has been no need to decide on a sample which could potentially be restrictive. Thirdly, the survey allowed the wider coverage of participants whilst ensuring costs and time were more manageable and predictable than other strategies such as a large number of in-depth interviews. The researcher set a finite timescale by which data needed to be collected which allowed planning to take place for data analysis. Using a quantitative research method such as a survey allowed data to be collected to address the first two research aims. The third aim regarding the leadership practice of respondents is more complex. The responses needed to clearly indicate whether leaders believe they display the characteristics of the transformational leader, distributed leader or managerial leader. More discussion on this issue takes place in the research design section of the chapter. In general, a survey approach to collecting quantitative data has many benefits so long as the data that was collected is based on breadth of a group of respondents rather than depth of responses.

A qualitative approach seeks to garner more in depth information which can be gathered in a number of ways such as focus groups, observation and interviews. While focus groups and observation have their merits, in this study they were not appropriate methods. Focus groups involve a group of individuals with "...particular emphasis...placed on the interaction within the group as a means for eliciting information" (Denscombe, 2007, p.178) and so was not the choice method when attempting to gain information that may be confidential or personal. Observation was not an appropriate method as it was not feasible in terms of time and fitness for purpose to gather the data required. A research interview was used to gain insights into perceptions of FE Principals by collecting data based on their opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences, by being able to tackle sensitive issues which was difficult to achieve through questionnaire and by gathering privileged information unobtainable through questionnaire. The type of research interview chosen is discussed in the research strategy and design section of this chapter.

Mixed methods research, as illustrated in figure 3.1, takes up the centre ground of the “Qual-Mixed-Quan Continuum” and as such aims to enjoy the best of both worlds. As Curran (2008) explains the mixed methods approach - “the dynamism and growth of the field may reflect several decades of frustration amongst many social scientists who view the epistemological approaches as stultifying and unnecessarily divisive” – this is “...despite the importance and relevance of the claims on each side of the divide” (p.224). As Axinn and Pearce (2006) explain the main motivation for research to utilise a mixed method approach is to “...design strategies of integration that counterbalance the weaknesses of one method with the strengths of another” (p.25).

The simplest way of describing the mixed methods approach is that it is a strategy that uses both quantitative and qualitative methods. According to Denscombe (2007), there are a number of reasons why a mixed method approach is used. These are improved accuracy, gaining a more complete picture, compensating strengths and weaknesses, developing an analysis and as an aid to sampling. Accuracy should be improved as the findings of one method can be checked against the findings of another – this is what Greene et al (1989) call “...convergence, corroboration, correspondence of results from the different methods” (p.257). In this thesis, the accuracy of the results from the questionnaire was determined by the truthfulness of responses by the principals completing the questions which was assumed to be present. By interviewing a small sample of respondents any link between background and leadership practice was explored further thus increasing the accuracy of results. This principle is in line with that of triangulation which is described by Hittleman (2002) as being a procedure for cross-validating information. Triangulation is explored further later in this chapter. In general, a more complete picture is likely to be achieved using more than one method to research a subject. In the study undertaken for this thesis it was possible find out about FE leaders’ backgrounds and perceived leadership practice by using a questionnaire but it was possible to get more detailed information by following up with some qualitative research in the form of interviews where responses from the questionnaire were further probed. For example, where principals perceived that they are a transformational leader they were asked

whether this leadership practice is appropriate at all times, whether there are any mediating factors and whether they believe that their background has influenced the way in which they lead. To compensate for the respective strengths and weaknesses of different research methods Denzin (1989) argues that “by combining multiple observers, theories, methods and data sources, [researchers] can hope to overcome the intrinsic bias that comes from single-methods, single observer, and single theory studies” (p.307). In other words, if it is thought that the use of questionnaires gives superficial answers then this can be complemented with in depth interviews. If in depth interviews are viewed as not utilising a large enough sample size then this shortfall is covered with the use of questionnaires. Analysis can be developed using a mixed methods approach where one method is used to inform another. So, further data is gained to help “...shed light on things” (Denscombe, 2007, p.111).

Mixed method research can also be used as an aid to sampling. In this thesis a large number of questionnaires were e-mailed to gain an overview of the situation which then allowed a much smaller number of respondents to be interviewed. These interviewees were chosen solely based on the principals’ willingness to participate in the interview process following an invitation at the end of the internet survey. Whilst this is best described as a convenience sample, the principals interviewed represented a good range in terms of diversity (see Table 4.4). The sample had a good gender balance as it consisted of four females and four males, the academic disciplines from which the principals came was varied as was their experience as college principals. This experience ranged from less than a year at the time of the interview to over 20 years in post. The colleges at which the principals lead also exhibited variety with a mixture of medium and large sized institutions; satisfactory and good Ofsted ratings were also in evidence. The rationale for the interviews remained the same however the respondents were sampled. The structure of the interview process will be described later in this chapter. The mixed method approach also assisted in achieving what Axinn and Pearce (2006) call a key principle in that it allowed a combination of methods that encourage investigator involvement such as interviews and focus groups with methods that do not encourage investigator involvement such as questionnaires. This

combining of methods gives the best of both worlds according to Axinn and Pearce (2006). The same authors also highlight the need to be flexible in all types of research undertaken in terms of "...design and application of data collection methods, allowing new methods and integrative designs to be tailored to the study of cause and consequence" (Axinn and Pearce, 2006, p.25).

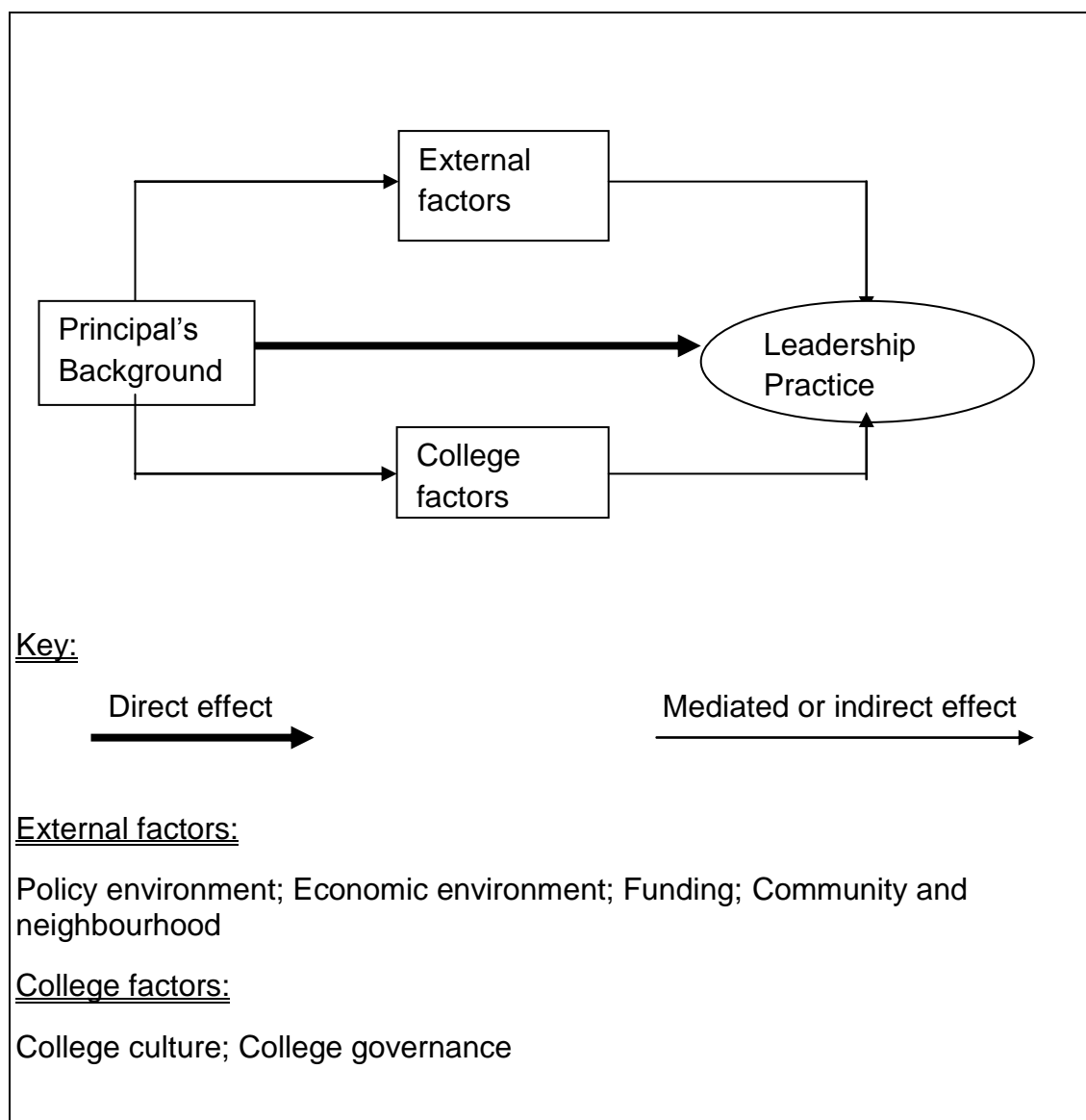
### **3.4 Research Strategy and Design**

The study being undertaken in this thesis explores the possibility of a perceived link between a leader's background and the leadership practice they perceive that they display. In other words, what is the perceived impact (direct or indirect) of an individual's background on their leadership practice?

Leithwood (1999; 2002) (with others) has examined this area in relation to school improvement over many years with what he calls mediating variables such as "...school culture, strategies for change, school structure, and the school environment." (Yu, Leithwood and Jantzi, 2002, p.370) influencing the relationship between leaders and student outcomes. Leithwood found that "...studies that inquire only about the direct effects of principals on student outcomes tend to report weak or inconclusive relationships, whereas studies that include mediating and/or moderating variables in their designs tend to report significant relationships" (Leithwood and Jantzi, 1999, p.680). There was therefore a need to take mediating factors into account when discerning leadership practice.

Levacic (2005) put forward a model to demonstrate the causal relationship between educational leadership and its effects on student outcomes. This has been amended to suit the purposes of this thesis as shown in figure 3.2.

**Figure 3.2: A simplified causal model of principal's background and its effect on leadership practice (adapted from Levacic, 2005, p.201)**



The consideration of research strategy, research method and philosophical approach led to the design of the research to be undertaken. As stated earlier in the chapter, a mixed method approach was most appropriate with the use of a survey initially followed by a small number of interviews.

The survey had a number of aims. There was a need to gather descriptive information about FE leaders' education such as what type of institutions at which they had studied; what they studied and qualifications gained and their professional background such as previous employment within and outside education. Their perception of the leadership they practice was also sought



through the use of a questionnaire. There were a number of options when deciding on the most effective way to gather information using a survey or questionnaire approach including postal, telephone, face-to-face and internet surveys. Postal surveys tend to get low response rates (according to Neuman, 2006 the lowest rate of the four types mentioned), can be slow to administer with a limit on the number of different styles of question that can be asked. Telephone surveys are a quicker method to use and have a better response rate but have a high cost and require access in terms of time. Face-to-face interviews have high response rates but can be costly and time consuming. As this thesis aimed to garner responses from as wide a range of FE colleges across the country as possible this type of survey was not feasible. Internet surveys were a cheap and fast way of making contact with FE Principals with direct access a possibility. By using a web-based programme, such as survey monkey or the University of Southampton's 'isurvey', there was speed and accuracy of collection and analysis. In relation to the efficiency of internet based survey technologies, Dillman (2000) stated that "these efficiencies include the nearly complete elimination of paper, postage, mailout, and data entry cost" and that "...the time required for survey implementation can be reduced from weeks to days, or even hours" (p.352). As technology has progressed greatly over the decade or so since this was published, these efficiencies have improved further. Notes of caution regarding this method of survey include the lack of depth that can be obtained and the inability to ask follow up questions. The research interview stage tackled such issues, albeit with a small number of interviewees, as respondents were given the opportunity to discuss their backgrounds in more depth with the prospect of further reflection on the influence of background on the way in which they lead their institution.

Choosing the type of research interview depends on the data that was required to be collected to answer the research aims, specifically the third and fourth aims exploring the leadership styles of FE leaders and analysis of any perceived relationship that may exist between FE leaders' backgrounds and their leadership styles. While some writers believe that interviewing is unproblematic as it is just "...a conversation with a purpose" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.268) and "an interview is a purposeful conversation, usually

between two people...that is directed by one in order to get information” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, p.133), Scheurich (1997) disagrees.

Whilst Scheurich (1997) confirms that from a conventional or positivist standpoint “...the researcher is purposeful and knows what she/he is doing” (p.61) and that “...the questions can be stated in such a way that different interviewees understand the question in the same way” (p.62). In other words, interviews can be carried out in an objective way where research data can be collected and analysed using the same approach as data collected through survey research. However, this is too neat and straightforward for Scheurich as, he argues, “...the physical, non-verbal aspects of communication disappear. The variations in tone, intensity, and rhythm disappear. Even the pauses often disappear” (Scheurich, 1997, p.62). This perceived problem of transcription, along with Scheurich’s assertion that “...the researcher brings considerable conscious and unconscious baggage – other related research, training within a particular discipline,..., epistemological inclinations,..., and individual idiosyncrasies” (Scheurich, 1997, p.73) and that the interviewee may bring the same baggage means that interviewing is not just a conversation with a purpose (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Scheurich’s critique of research interviewing highlights the need for care to be taken when interpreting the responses and interactions that take place when gathering data using this method. This need to be reflexive is important to acknowledge in all methods of carrying out educational research as the bias and beliefs of the researcher should be recognised and, if necessary, put to one side as far as possible.

There are a number of types of research interview that can be used in educational research. For the purposes of this thesis, semi-structured one-to-one interviews were used. Structured interviews have been rejected as the format bears too many similarities with questionnaire methods in that there are set questions with no variation from the format. Unstructured interviews may not allow the interview to have a sharp enough focus and the relevant data to be collected. Semi-structured interviews “...let the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher” while the “...interviewer still has a clear list of issues to be addressed and questions to be answered” (Denscombe, 2007, p.176). This also fits in with the post-positivist approach as described by Ritchie and Rigano (2001), “rather than an

interviewee providing prepared/manufactured responses to standard questions designed to be unbiased and neutral, we strive to engage social construction of a narrative with our participants. In this way we hope to activate the respondent's 'stock of knowledge'" (p.744).

By gathering data using both an internet survey and a number of semi-structured interviews, a mixed method approach was chosen. On Teddlie's continuum the approach fits into Zone D with more emphasis on the gathering of quantitative data. This was then followed by a small number of semi-structured interviews. This is a sequential study with quantitative research followed by qualitative (Denscombe, 2007).

### **3.4.1 Triangulation**

The research method being undertaken in this thesis is one that allows triangulation to take place - triangulation being the ability to view things from more than one perspective.

Triangulation is a method used to check and establish validity in research studies which can be employed in both quantitative and qualitative research (Guion, 2002). Denzin (1989) distinguished four forms of triangulation, namely data triangulation (data is collected using several sampling strategies), investigator triangulation (more than one researcher gathers and interprets data), theoretical triangulation (more than one theoretical position is taken in interpreting data) and methodological triangulation (more than one method in gathering data is used).

For this research study specifically, methodological triangulation (between methods) has been used. This type of triangulation is "...the most common form of triangulation adopted by social researchers" (Denscombe, 2007, p.135) and it allows findings to be corroborated or questioned as the data produced by the different methods can be compared. It also allows findings to be complemented as new or different data is found by using the different methods. On the whole, triangulation by using a mixed method approach is perceived to be a worthwhile pursuit with comments such as "triangulation was adopted to make qualitative research more objective and less subjective, in other words, more scientific" (Lichtman, 2006, p.229). Bryman (2006) argues

that triangulation should be used in mixed methods research to check validity of findings by cross-checking between methods to offer the prospect of enhanced confidence in the data. Specifically in this thesis triangulation between the two methods of internet survey and interview was an attempt to give a fuller picture "...to enhance the completeness of the findings" (Denscombe, 2007, p.138) and to give "... a more detailed and balanced picture of the situation" (Altrichter et al, 2008, p.147). One of the key disadvantages of using triangulation is that it may produce contradictory results. However, in this thesis this was embraced as a strength of adopting a post-positivist approach where the data collected in the internet survey was explored further with those participating in the interview stage of the research. Where contradictory results were found these have been commented on in an attempt to understand why principals did not appear to be adopting their preferred approach to leadership. As Mathison (1998) states "the value of triangulation lies in providing evidence such that the researcher can construct explanations of the social phenomena from which they arise" (p.15) which in the case of this study means using the internet survey and interviews as a mixed method approach. This follows the suggestion that "the use of appropriate multiple methods will result in more valid research findings" (Mathison, 1998, p.14).

### **3.4.2 Reliability and validity**

In this study there was no guarantee that there would be a large response rate, indeed previous studies suggested that a large response rate was highly unlikely. However, this low response rate can be countered to an extent with the use of more in depth qualitative research through interview, as discussed in the preceding section on triangulation.

Reliability and validity needed to be considered in this study to ensure that the data collected was as accurate as possible. Reliability is concerned with precision, accuracy, consistency and replicability (Cohen et al, 2000) and meant that these aspects had to be considered when carrying out the two types of research.

As with many concepts discussed in this thesis, reliability has been conceived differently by different writers in qualitative research. Stenbacka (2001) argues that "...the concept of reliability is even misleading in qualitative research. If the qualitative study is discussed with reliability as a criterion, the consequence is rather that the study is no good" (p.552). Patton (2002), on the other hand, believes that both validity and reliability are two factors that are of vital importance in "the qualitative perspective...to try to picture the empirical social world as it actually exists to those under investigation, rather than as the researcher imagines it to be" (p.53). Other writers, such as Lincoln and Guba (1985), seek a more specific term for reliability to be used in the qualitative paradigm. They suggest "dependability" (p.219) which can be established by what they call "auditing" (p.219).

Reliability in the internet survey used in this study was addressed by ensuring that the simple questions asked meant it more likely that if the same method of data collection was used with the same participants then the results would have been the same.

Reliability was partially addressed by the subsequent interviews which arose out of the survey for eight of the respondents. In terms of accuracy of interview data, I transcribed the interviews as the sole researcher in an attempt to ensure an accurate record of the interviews was maintained.

Section 3.4.1 on triangulation made several references to the attempts to enhance validity in this study through the use of a mixed methods approach. It is argued that it is impossible to be 100 per cent valid but it is best to "...strive to minimize invalidity and maximise validity" (Cohen et al, 2000, p.105). Validity in the internet survey relied on criteria such as whether all respondents shared the same understanding of the questions and that they answered their questions honestly. This was partially addressed by interviewing eight of the respondents in an attempt to confirm concurrent validity.

Another key aspect of validity in the internet survey was ensuring sampling allowed a representative group of respondents, as using a representative sample is seen by some writers as a tenet of ensuring validity (Cohen et al, 2000). The method undertaken in this thesis hoped to bypass this pitfall by mailing all FE Principals. Those completing the survey did not therefore fulfil

any pre-determined criteria and so could be called a self-selecting sample of FE principals where a (albeit fortuitously) sample reflecting a range of characteristics were interviewed as discussed in section 3.8.3 of this thesis.

One of the keys to ensure greater validity in the interviewing stage of the research was to eliminate as much bias as possible (Cohen et al, 2000). A simple approach was to assume that if the interview had structure and the views and opinions of the interviewer were minimised then both validity and reliability were enhanced.

As with reliability, validity is a concept that researchers in the qualitative paradigm recognise as being important but often wish to redefine. Other terms have been adopted such as trustworthiness, worthy, relevant, plausible, confirmable, credible or representative (Guba and Lincoln, 1998; Hammersley, 1987; Mishler, 1990; Wolcott, 1990) which highlights the difficulty of understanding the term and establishing a common definition. What is clear is that there a need to check that "...the research is measuring what it was intended to measure" (Winter, 2000, p.3). In this thesis, in the interviewing process, the 'truth' was from the principals' perspectives and so had to be treated with caution. As stated by Bridges and Smith (2007) "...such accounts are essentially *interpretations* of experience...we do not ask whether stories are true or untrue, but whether they are convincing or unconvincing" (p.226). The phenomenological approach to research required the researcher to believe that the respondent was giving an account of the facts from their perspective which assumed their honesty.

It seems to be the case that in qualitative research, as in quantitative, there is a congruence of reliability and validity as stated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) – "since there can be no validity without reliability, a demonstration of the former is sufficient to establish the latter" (p.316).

This discussion of reliability and validity leads to the importance of ethical considerations in carrying out educational research.

### 3.5 Ethical considerations

There are a number of reasons why ethics are of central importance to educational research. Protection of research participants in the form of informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity are important considerations in ensuring that ethical guidelines are followed. These principles emanate from a number of sources namely, according to Macfarlane (2009) - The Nuremberg Code (1949), Kant's categorical imperative (1964) and The Belmont Report (1979). To delve into these sources in depth would be tangential and inappropriate in this study. However Kant's ethic of 'respect for persons' is one that is crucial in ensuring an ethical code is followed. The bases of informed consent are that participation in research should always be voluntarily given and that participants need to have sufficient information about the research to weigh up the risks and benefits which will allow them to make a reasoned judgement as to whether they wish to participate or not. This seeks to protect respondents' autonomy as refusal to participate is binding (Howe and Moses, 1999). To ensure that informed consent is achieved it is usual to obtain written confirmation that potential respondents agree to participation as it is believed that "...this protects the researcher from any possible accusation that he or she acted improperly when recruiting people to take part in the research" (Denscombe, 2007, p.145). It was vitally important that the participants in the research also felt protected and so had the opportunity to read and sign the consent form (Appendix E) and could withdraw from the process at any stage if they so wished. Informed consent in this thesis was necessary in the interview process as it may have been possible for those working within an institution to recognise their college principal from the responses given in the interview. It was important that the principals being interviewed were made aware of this as anonymity may not fully protect them from 'local knowledge'. Privacy deals with the way in which sensitive issues are collected and disseminated. This may involve participants' views on religion, sexual practices, racial prejudices or their income. By allowing the participants the opportunity to give their informed consent, they were aware of the risks that may occur in relation to their privacy. Privacy can include the categories of anonymity and confidentiality. "Anonymity means that people remain anonymous, or nameless" (Neuman, 2006, p.139) and as such is

designed to protect the privacy of participants. One method used is to give an individual a fictitious name, location and place of work. The principals interviewed in this study were given fictitious names and there was no reference to their place of work. The concept of confidentiality means that the researcher protects the participant's right to privacy even though anonymity may not be possible. The participants in the interview stage of the research were offered the option of being sent a transcript of the interview to check they were satisfied that it was a true reflection of the interview and that they were happy for the data to be used in the thesis. All data collected has been securely protected. According to Neuman (2006, p.139) – "A researcher may provide anonymity without confidentiality, or vice versa, although they usually go together" which continues to illustrate the fact that all ethical considerations need to be in operation together to protect the individual's rights. There are other ethical considerations relating to the way in which the research is carried out which fall into the category of research misconduct. While research misconduct may have no have direct effect on research participants it "...wrongs others within the research community and damages the research enterprise overall" (Howe and Moses, 1999, p.25). This area of ethics includes such misdemeanours as falsifying data, reporting results incorrectly and plagiarism. It was imperative that the research undertaken in this study avoided such misconduct by keeping accurate records, all data was double checked and ensured any mention of other research was accurately referenced. It is reported by others that these pitfalls can be avoided if care is taken to research with the virtues of integrity such as courage, respectfulness, resoluteness, sincerity, humility and reflexivity (Macfarlane, 2009).

A particular emphasis of my research ethics has been on ensuring reflexivity has been at the heart of the study. This is where "researchers turn a critical gaze towards themselves" (Finlay and Gough, 2003, p.3) which I felt was imperative as a leader in a further education college researching other leaders in further education colleges. I have used reflexivity to "...continually monitor and audit the research process" (Finlay and Gough, 2003, p.4) by consciously attempting to ensure that my own beliefs and values have not influenced the implementation or analysis of research in this study.



Therefore, I have sought to adhere to Macfarlane's (2009) list of virtues when carrying out the research for this thesis by ensuring that constant checks were made when collating and analysing data, when contacting and interviewing respondents and when writing up the recommendations and conclusions of the research.

### **3.5.1 Ethical considerations – internet research**

The general ethical considerations discussed in this chapter are pertinent to all types of research undertaken. There are specific issues which were considered when carrying out the internet-based research pertinent to this thesis. Informed consent may have been more troublesome than using a paper-based system. It was a relatively straightforward process to get the information to the potential respondents via e-mail. It required the design of the research to enable the individual to give consent by responding to the e-mail confirming that there is an agreement to participate. This allowed a proxy signature which signalled that the participant was willing to take part in a project of which they had the opportunity to read the details. There was a need for an assumption made that if the person completing the on-line questionnaire purported to be the FE principal then it was that person participating in the research. In terms of confidentiality in internet-based research, it was important to inform would-be respondents that "...all reasonable precautions will be taken to avoid the disclosure of identities" (Denscombe, 2007, p.150).

### **3.5.2 Ethical considerations – interviews**

In relation to qualitative research, such as interviewing FE college principals, there are specific ethical considerations. These include informed consent, confidentiality and the consequences of interviews (Cohen et al, 2000). These issues have been discussed earlier in this chapter and do not need to be re-emphasised, but were necessary to consider when completing ethical protocol forms.

The ethical protocol forms can be found in Appendix E and detail the procedures and methods under which this research was carried out. The consent form is specifically relevant to the interviews carried out. The form

asked the participants to agree to four statements regarding the interview process. These are:

- I have read and understood the information sheet [questions] and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study
- I agree to take part in this interview and agree for my data to be used for the purpose of this study
- I agree to be recorded in this interview for the purpose of this study
- I understand my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without consequence

The statements directly addressed the considerations as stated by Cohen et al (2000) and gave the participants the appropriate ethical rights. Participants were also sent the Participant Information Sheet, as contained in Appendix E, which gave more information to participants and thus allowed the principals to be fully informed of what they were getting involved in.

Formal ethical approval was granted by the University of Southampton ethics committee in December 2010 in adherence to BERA guidelines.

### **3.6 Research Instruments**

The two research approaches that have been utilised are online questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The structure and content of the online questionnaire required careful consideration to ensure that it allowed enough data to be gathered to address the research aims without being too lengthy risking being put immediately in the “to do at a later date” pile in the Principal’s office. The advice of Denscombe (2007) was heeded to ensure that I “...only ask[ed] those questions which are absolutely vital for the research” (p.162) and that the “...task of responding to the questionnaire [was] as straightforward and speedy as possible” (p162). The questionnaire is shown in Appendix B. The majority of the questions requested data on the educational and professional background of the respondents meaning that quick and easy completion was possible. Gender and age range were established initially with details then requested on the current position held. Questions regarding

previous positions held and length of time in education followed to establish the principal's educational career. Non-educational employment was then investigated from which (in conjunction with educational career) respondents were categorised into vocational groupings as described in the literature review. The respondent's education was then sought to help to establish any link between that and their leadership practice. The final question asked the respondents to indicate which of the three approaches to leadership best describes their practice. This part of the questionnaire posed the greatest difficulty. A number of options were considered when designing the question. The first option considered asking leaders to rank the characteristics and behaviours they display most frequently from a list of around fifteen. It was decided that this was too difficult for respondents to complete accurately and with any great speed, there was some overlap between the characteristics of the three leadership practices and there would have been many problems when analysis was completed. With this option any meaningful analysis would have been problematic. The second option considered grouping the characteristics together and asking respondents to state which group of characteristics suited the leadership they practice. Again, it was decided that this would have been too complicated to have utility in what was designed to be a short, easy to complete questionnaire. A third option was considered which gave the name of the leadership practice (transformational, distributed, and managerial) and a short definition and asked which practice leaders perceived they undertook. It was thought that this was likely to tempt the respondents to identify the type of leadership they want to practice rather than that they actually do practice. The fourth option was to define each type of leadership practice but to code them using Type A, Type B and Type C. This allowed respondents to consider their leadership without being swayed by the titles transformational, distributed and managerial which they could have perceived as having either negative or positive connotations. These definitions have been derived from the literature review chapter of the thesis with consideration of the interpretation of the leadership practices that best suited the research aims and methods. The fourth option was chosen as it allowed respondents to choose the style they perceived they most regularly practiced but was not influenced by a named approach to leadership to which they may

have preconceived opinions. The three definitions chosen were as shown in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1: Types of Leader in Further Education (adapted from Bush and Glover (2003))**

**Type A** – I am a leader who inspires, motivates and encourages a culture of questioning and intellectual stimulation.

**Type B** – I undertake leadership that is a shared, social process.

**Type C** - I am a leader whose focus is on financial sustainability to underpin the quality of the learning experience to achieve organisational goals.

The defining of the three leadership practices in itself had its own difficulties. Transformational leadership (Type A) sounds very attractive and may have been difficult to resist for some leaders. Distributed leadership, as discussed in the literature review, is a description of how leadership is constructed rather than being a prescriptive method of leadership. The definition of distributed leadership (Type B) was derived from Spillane's understanding of the term as this was the interpretation I concluded in the literature review had the most utility in this thesis. Managerial leadership (Type C) focuses on the three 'Es' of effectiveness, efficiency and economy reworded to sound appealing to respondents whilst still reflecting the nature of the leadership practice. In these challenging economic times Type C leadership could have resonated with FE college principals as the 'bottom line' is the focal point.

The purpose of the interviews was to gain insights into perceptions of FE principals by collecting data based on their opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences. This was possible by being able to tackle sensitive issues which may have been difficult to achieve through questionnaire and by gathering privileged information unobtainable through questionnaire. The basic structure of the interview can be found in Appendix C, along with a list of further questions asked to follow up answers given either on the internet survey or during the interview process.

Semi-structured interviewing allowed flexibility leading to the interviewee being able to elaborate points of interest. For example, the first question asked

interviewees to describe their educational background exploring in more detail the information gathered in the questionnaire stage of the research process. The interviewees were then asked to consider if they think that their educational background has had any impact on the way in which they have approached their career. This could have been their choice of educational establishment in which to work for example. The second part of the second question asked how their leadership had been influenced by their educational background. This could have lead into investigating my perceptions of any links further. The third and fourth questions follow a similar track to questions one and two but in relation to professional background. The purpose of this section of the interview was to gather further evidence of the perceived influence of professional background on leadership and explore any linkage that may exist between the two. The fifth question was an open ended invitation to ascertain any impact of mediating factors as described in Figure 3.2 of this chapter which may have complemented or indeed dispelled any links found between interviewee background and perceptions of leadership practice.

The research instruments used were piloted to ensure they were fit for purpose. The questionnaire was uploaded onto the University of Southampton's 'isurvey' site and accompanied by an e-mail to be sent to Further Education college principals. A copy of the e-mail and survey can be found in Appendix D. A piloting exercise took place where my college principal and deputy principal completed the survey and fed back their thoughts. These were positive in terms of the ease of completion and short length of time required to complete the survey. A similar pilot took place with the interview section of the research. To pilot the interviews, I interviewed my college principal and her deputy. The feedback again was positive and I felt that my instruments would be effective in their aim of providing the data to answer my research aims.

### **3.7 Data Collection**

This section focuses on the method of data collection for this research and includes sections on the processes of collection and analysis.

Firstly, consideration is given to the operational aspects of undertaking this research including the data collection instruments used, how effective they were and what limitations they had. The data analysis process is then outlined and its effectiveness compared with what was planned and what limitations were identified.

The nature of the research data sought and selection of the data collection instruments and methods have been described earlier in this chapter, so only the implementation aspects of these are considered here. Consideration is given to the following:

- undertaking internet based research;
- using semi-structured interviews;
- the effectiveness of these methods of data collection;
- the quality of the data collected.

### **3.8 Instruments and methods used**

Earlier in this chapter the decisions to use an internet survey and semi-structured interviews as the data gathering tools were outlined in some detail. They were chosen as methods that would maximise the opportunities to collect relevant and rich data both from a range of respondents across the FE sector and a smaller number of principals who were prepared to be questioned more in depth during the interviews stage of the process.

#### **3.8.1 Internet Survey**

The internet survey was conducted using the University of Southampton's website 'isurvey'. Details of this survey are included in Appendix B of this thesis. The most straightforward way of conducting the survey would have been by contacting all Further Education principals in England directly by email. This would allow the link to the online survey to be directly accessed for completion. However, obtaining such a list proved to be a troublesome endeavour. The Association of Colleges (AoC) would not provide an email

contact list due to data protection. A discussion with my college principal led to her personal assistant searching files and folders and making telephone calls but to no avail. It was then suggested by my principal that I email the general college email of each institution with the subject of the email being "For the Attention of the College Principal / Chief Executive". I decided to use this strategy and formulated a database to record details of each college's principal, website and email address. These details were obtained by visiting each college website in turn and searching for the principal's name (often found in the welcome to the college statement) and the email address for the college. This was a time consuming exercise but was the only avenue open given the data protection issues outlined above. The general email addresses consisted of info@(college name), enquiries@(college name), and generalenquiries@(college name) amongst a number of other variations. Once collated an email was sent out. This can be found in Appendix D. The email was sent to 224 Further Education colleges on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2010. Twenty five of these were returned as undeliverable which left 199 delivered emails. Follow up emails were sent on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2011, 21<sup>st</sup> January 2011 and 7<sup>th</sup> February 2011 to boost initial completion. The fourth email highlighted the average length of time for completion being four minutes to encourage participation from those who felt they did not have time to respond. The follow up emails were timed to remind those who had not had a chance to complete the survey would be able to do so but did not feel harassed by a barrage of reminders. As stated by Deutskens et al (2004) – "sending out multiple follow-ups in an online survey is virtually costless, however, it should be done with great care" (p.26) with Solomon (2001) suggesting that "repeated follow-ups have diminishing returns and may be considered as spam, thereby irritating or annoying potential respondents without noticeably increasing response rates" (p.3). There were a total of 80 attempts to complete the questionnaire of which 39 successfully completed giving a response rate of 19.6%. Attempting to explain why there were so many unsuccessful attempts would be merely speculation but could be due to distraction from other activities such as phone calls or meetings, lack of understanding of the nature of the study or merely an inquisitive interest as to the content of the survey. As the survey was completed anonymously it is impossible to ascertain how many of the

incomplete surveys then went on to complete successfully. Recent research by Baruch and Holtom (2008) into survey response rates suggests that “...electronic data collection efforts (e.g. email, phone, web) resulted in response rates as high as or higher than traditional mail methodology” (p.1150), however there is a general trend of declining response rate due to over-surveying as employees are flooded with questionnaires (Baruch and Holtom, 2008). Baruch and Holtom (2008) also point out that “...researchers who approach top managers to obtain data may face lower response rates than their colleagues who study non-executive employees” (p.1152) and that “for research being conducted at the organizational level or top-executive level, there is clear evidence that studies with lower response rates may still be published” (Baruch and Holtom, 2008, p.1152). Indeed when I explained the approximately 20% level of response to those principals I interviewed who asked about the internet survey they were impressed that I had received as many as 39 completions. The 19.6% response rate compares favourably with research carried out by Dillman et al (2009) where a response rate to an internet survey resulted in a response rate of 12.7%. In educational research in the further education sector specifically, Hannagan et al (2007) reported a response rate of 28.5% responding to a questionnaire sent to principals and chief executives in 281 colleges regarding the management of the sector, whilst Lumby (2003) reported that 37% of the 60 colleges contacted completed a questionnaire on the subject of distributed leadership. As the trend for survey completion is declining and high level executives are less likely to participate than others, a rate of around one fifth completion can be seen as a reasonable and useable outcome, though not a sufficiently high number for statistical analysis.

### **3.8.2 Internet Survey Data Analysis**

The survey was administered using the University of Southampton’s website ‘isurvey’. The software produced tables and graphs from the data collected to present the basic data in a straightforward manner. I collated the information from each of the survey responses in a spreadsheet to gain an overview of the data that had been collected. The spreadsheet summarised the information gathered from each question allowing an outline of the data to



be viewed. The data could then be filtered to ascertain whether any relationships could be identified between variables. For example, when respondents are sorted by perceived leadership type, there can be a view on whether their vocational grouping has any influence, i.e. does a particular vocational group perceive that they lead in a certain way? Many variables can be compared in this way and have been commented upon later in this chapter.

### **3.8.3 Semi-structured interviews**

By using semi-structured interviews I expected to be able to obtain in-depth insights in response to questions which were designed to address and remain focused on the issues raised by my key research aims. In creating the questions to be used during the interview it was important that the main focus of the research aims was incorporated and the questions were sufficiently open to allow the respondents to offer their own opinions without being led or constrained. As my research aims were very specific, I decided to pilot them as the ones for the interview. This piloting followed a number of stages, starting with discussion with my research supervisor, and with an academic colleague who was quite independent of my research. In addition to this the questions were discussed with the principal and deputy principal of the college in which I work in order to establish the meaning of phrases where they were uncertain in any way. This led to the piloting of the interview questions with my college principal and deputy principal. This final stage did not result in any changes in wording, and gave me the confidence to feel that this research instrument was fit for purpose. The questions were sent to the respondents in advance of the meeting so that they were able to undertake some thought and preparation beforehand if they wished and to ensure that the respondents did not feel in any way uncomfortable with the questions on the day. Furthermore, I was able to provide any additional explanations requested by the respondents as the interviews progressed. The issues relating to sample selection, access and ethics were addressed earlier in this chapter.

Each interview was booked in advance and confirmed a few days before it was due to take place. The interviews were conducted either face to face or over the telephone. The decision on which of these methods to use was based on a number of factors. These were, in no particular order of importance, the

availability of the respondents, the location of the interviewee and the time available to both the interviewee and interviewer. The face to face interviews all took place in the respective respondents' offices at the respondents' places of work and were audio-recorded for later full transcription by myself. All of the interviewees appeared relaxed and happy to give responses freely and they each talked with interest for up to forty minutes on the issues they thought were important in relation to the questions posed.

The decision to undertake telephone interviews as an alternative to completing them face to face was not taken lightly. However, the geographical spread of the college principals who had agreed to be interviewed led this research towards the consideration of conducting half of the interviews (those with a travel time of over three hours each way) by telephone. This was felt to be justifiable given the full-time nature of the interviewer's employment and the consequential difficulty in being released from contractual obligations. Whilst recent literature by Irvine (2010) comments that "... methodological literature has traditionally advised against using the telephone for qualitative interviews" (p.1) the study concludes after consideration of the pros and cons of such an approach that:

In many cases, the practical or ethical motivations for using telephone interviews may be reason enough to justify that mode, despite any perceived interactional shortcomings. (Irvine, 2010, p.6)

Informed consent for the telephone interviews was obtained by giving the same explanation as with a face to face interview. Oral consent was then recorded at the beginning of the telephone interview by reading the consent form out to respondents over the phone and asking them to confirm their agreement. There was also an offer to post a copy of the consent form to the participants if they wished but none felt this to be necessary. Brief field notes taken at the time of the interviews show that participants were all keen to talk about the issues I wanted to discuss and considered it a good opportunity to reflect themselves on what their thoughts were and how they led their colleges. The quality of the data obtained from these interviews is generally well focussed on the research aims.

In comparing the data collected by telephone and in a face to face environment there was no discernable variation in quality or quantity of data. Face to face interviews lasted between 17 and 40 minutes whilst telephone interviews had a duration of between 18 minutes up to 30 minutes. Overall, I believe that the data obtained through these semi-structured interviews are relevant to the aims of the research and in sufficient quality to enable a thorough analysis to support a valid demonstration of findings against the initial aims of the research, the main research aims and the conceptual frameworks. Eight interviews took place with FE college principals who had completed the online survey and agreed to further participation in my research. The eight Principals were chosen by convenience and were interviewed as a result of their willingness to take part and their availability in the timescale of the thesis. However, the respondents were diverse in that they covered a range of experience as leaders of their organisations from those new to post in September 2010 to those on the verge of retirement (in May 2011). The educational and professional backgrounds of the interviewees also showed variety as described earlier and in table 4.4.

The range and number of questions asked of each interviewee varied depending on a number of factors. Firstly, the interview process was planned to ensure that in addition to the basic list of questions, specific questions were asked to follow up the responses given in the internet survey. Secondly, interviewees' responses during the process of the interview often led to further questioning to elaborate and expand in an attempt to understand the reasons for responses rather than take the answers on face value. Thirdly, as the interviews progressed it became apparent that factors such as the economy and college culture were influencing leadership practice and so it was important to base questions on these. A list of the questions asked during the interviews can be found in Appendix C.

The online survey and the interviews were designed to explore any perceived link between educational and professional background and leadership practice. The educational background was determined by asking the respondents their main educational discipline in the survey stage of the research which could then be grouped as in Table 2.6.

The leadership practice perceived by respondents was ascertained by using the framework adapted from Bush and Glover (2003) as shown in table 2.4.

The three types of leadership were described as types A, B and C in the online survey allowing respondents to identify the type that they felt best described their approach to leading their establishment as shown in table 3.1.

It was important also to establish other factors that principals felt were important in determining the way in which they practiced their leadership. This was achieved by using the causal model as shown in Figure 3.2 to find out what other factors principals felt were of importance in influencing their leadership practice. Questions designed to allow respondents to state which factors were most and second most important determinants on the way in which they lead were included in the online survey and followed up during the interview stage of the research process.

The model illustrated in Figure 3.2 suggests that the background of the principals will have a direct effect on their leadership practice. This could, for example, be as a result of the principal's values determining organisational values and exerted through their position of power. The research process will investigate whether this is the case or whether the factors, be they college based or external to the college, have a more direct effect than that indicated in figure 3.2. There is much literature, for example, that suggests a link between culture and leadership. Schein (1992) regards culture and leadership "as two sides of the same coin" (p.1) and Lam (2002) suggests that there is an "...intricate relationship that exist among leadership, structure and culture" (p.439). The influence of culture will be explored further in the data analysis section of this chapter, as will the impact of funding issues and the economic environment. These factors may be of particular influence for those principals whose perceptions of their leadership suggest a managerial approach with its focus on the three 'Es' of effectiveness, efficiency and economy. As stated in the methodology chapter, in these challenging economic times managerial leadership could resonate with FE college principals as the 'bottom line' is the focal point of their college. Both the internet survey and interviews are designed to explore the accuracy of figure 3.2 for a particular cohort of principals in relation to the influences on their perceived leadership practice.

### 3.8.4 Interview data analysis

The interviews were transcribed shortly after taking place by the sole researcher of this thesis. Transcription “refers to the process of reproducing spoken words, such as those from an audio-taped interview, into written text” (Halcomb and Davidson, 2006, p.38). The eight interviews were transcribed verbatim which was a time-consuming process as recognised by Stage and Manning (2003) who have stated that “... one hour of interviewing requires four hours of transcription time” (p.45). In fact, my basic clerical skills meant half an hour of interview time took four hours to transcribe. However, Halcomb and Davidson (2006) argue that “logically, it may be beneficial for researchers to transcribe their own interview data, given that they have first-hand knowledge from their involvement in the interview process, expertise in the interview subject” (p.40) and therefore I felt better placed to deal with any pronunciation, enunciation, slang, terminological or technical nuances than a hired transcriber who is detached from the interview process and may not comprehend such elements of the interview as they were not present. It is important to note that the verbatim transcription of the interviews, along with the audio recordings themselves, “can be beneficial in facilitating the development of an audit trail of data analysis by supervisors or independent persons” (Halcomb and Davidson, 2006, p.40). Despite there being researchers who believe that verbatim transcription is complex and fraught with technical dilemmas (Fasick, 2001; Wellard and McKenna, 2001) such as misinterpretation of content and that “transcription is a chore” (Agar, 1996, p.153), I feel that the benefits outweigh these costs as the word-for-word record of the interviews allows me to recall specific details of the interview more readily than a series of field notes would allow. “Transcription is a powerful act of representation” (Oliver et al, 2005, p.1286) and the process allowed as accurate a record as possible of the eight interviews to be produced so the data could be analysed. I concur with Lapadat and Lindsay’s (1999) assertion that “...transcription facilitates the close attention and the interpretive thinking that is needed to make sense of the data” (p.82). In transcribing the interviews I have omitted details such as the length of pauses, instead opting for using the end of each line to signify a pause in speech.

The analysis of the interviews focused on the research aims. The interview transcripts were initially examined to identify the influence of educational and professional background on leadership practice. The process began by coding sections of the transcripts which struck me as being interesting or significant with respect to the interviewees' descriptions of their backgrounds and any influence this has had on the way in which they lead their organisation.

The analysis continued with the exploration of other factors the respondents felt had influenced their leadership practice. The influences included the two factors given by the respondents in the internet survey and any other factors commented upon through discussion in the interviews. Coding the transcripts was constructive as it helped to "define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means" (Charmaz, 2007, p.46). This allowed a distillation process to take place in which topics and text not directly related to the research aims were removed from the research and core themes which fall within the parameters of the research aims were identified.

It was important to attempt to look beyond the participants' own perceptions of their leadership practice and "get into the data" (Sandelowski, 1995, p.371) to explore any difference between or harmony with the way they describe their leadership and their perceived leadership practice. This exploration followed the post-positivist approach to this thesis in that there is an understanding that "reality... is socially constructed rather than objectively determined" (Noor, 2008, p.1602) and attempted to examine the interview data from an objective standpoint. The interview transcripts were examined using a meaning-focused approach (Tesch, 1990) in which there is an attempt to gain an "understanding [of] the subjective meaning of experiences and situations for the participants themselves, as opposed to how these meanings might fit with researchers' conceptions" (Fossey et al, 2002, p.728). In other words, the philosophical approach undertaken recognises that the practice stated by the participants is their perception and should be treated as such. The coding of the data allowed inconsistencies between the perception of their leadership and some of the practices they describe to be recognised.

The data is presented by exploring each interview examining themes that emerge in relation to the research aims. This is followed by a comparison of

my research findings with those of previously completed research in relation to FE leadership and closely related fields.

### **3.9 Conclusion – research methodology**

The research methods by which data are gathered was driven by the research aims that were addressed, strongly influenced by the ontological approach. The research aims required responses that were both straightforward and brief backed up by more depth data to establish an element of triangulation. This suggested that a mixed method approach was the most appropriate to implement. A mixed method approach along Teddlie's continuum required a post-positivist philosophical approach to be adopted as this study has the leadership practice perceived by Further Education principals as its central focus. The post-positivist approach recognises the complexity of gathering information about people's life and experience keeping the research reflexive and avoiding authoritarian tones (Ryan, 2006). As described by Lather (1991), post-positivism strives to "produce an awareness of the complexity, historical contingency and fragility of the practices that we invent to discover the truth about ourselves" (p.7). So, the methodology chosen aimed to discover the perceptions of leadership practice from the principals' points of view taking into account the limits to research recognised by post-positivists where research and analysis are engaged in explicitly to provide evidence for conclusions (Ryan, 2006).





## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings and Analysis**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the presentation of the data, the findings from the analysis, a discussion of the themes that emerge from the data and a comparison of the data collected to existing literature.

The nature of the data collected is reviewed for its match with the conceptual frameworks identified from the literature review, its quality and validity, and its effectiveness and limitations for analysis.

The chapter ends with a brief summary of the findings and considers how they provide insights to the main four research aims.

#### **4.2 Internet Survey**

The survey produced results designed to initiate the investigation of the research aims before further data collection through the interviews. While the response rate does not allow definitive conclusions to be made, the survey gives an indicative snapshot of a range of backgrounds from which FE College principals have emerged and a starting point from which to delve further in the interview stage of this mixed method research project. The framework shown in Figure 3.2 is the starting point for the analysis.

##### **4.2.1 Principal's professional background**

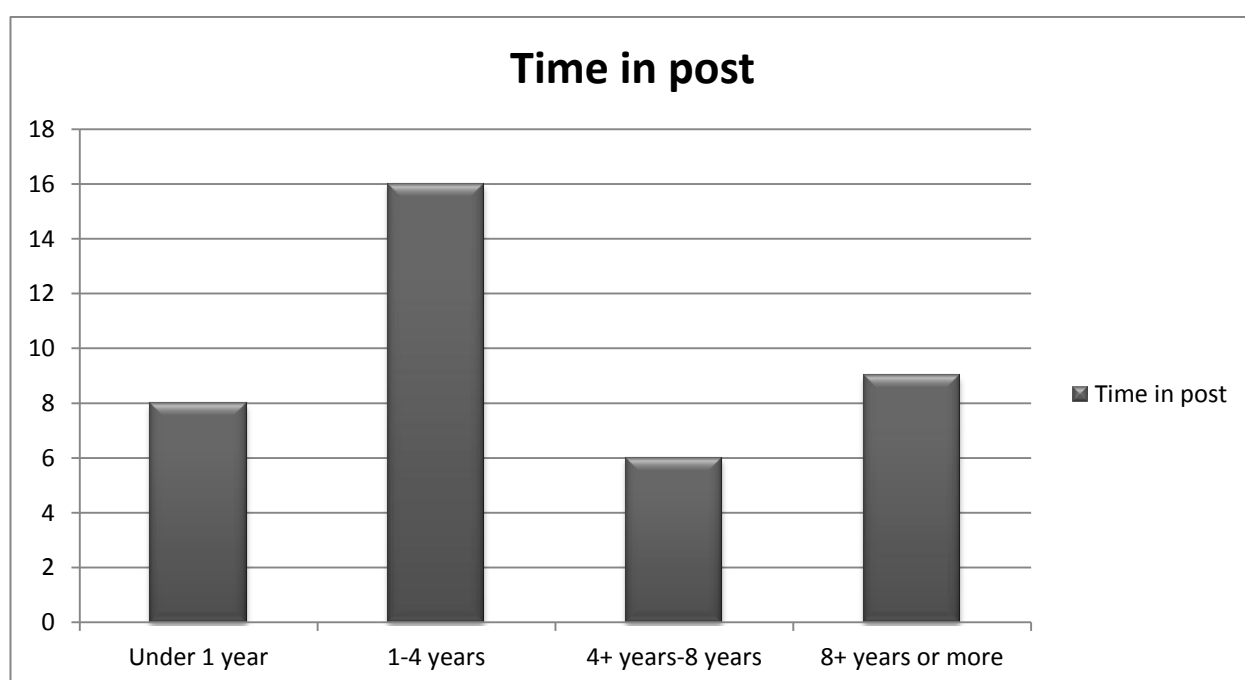
Questions relating to the background of the respondents gathered demographic information such as gender which showed that 42.9% of respondents were female, 57.1% male and age range is shown in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1: Principals' ages**

| Age               | Respondents |
|-------------------|-------------|
| 35 to 44 years    | 16.7%       |
| 45 to 54 years    | 40.5%       |
| 55 to 60 years    | 35.7%       |
| 61 years or older | 7.1%        |

In terms of demographical representation in the gender and age categories the results appear to give a spread of respondents albeit on a small scale. All respondents described their current position as either 'principal' or 'principal and chief executive' with a near 50:50 split between the two titles. The length of time in their current position of principal (and chief executive) of the respondents ranged from just one month to over 12 years with the average (mean) period of time in position being 4 years and 1 month. This variety of time in the job allows the responses given to draw from a range of experience in the position. Figure 4.1 summarises these findings.

**Figure 4.1: Time in post of principal/chief executive**



The figure shows that 24 of the 39 respondents (61.5%) have four or fewer years of experience as college principal indicating that over half of the respondents are reasonably inexperienced in the position of principal.

The replies to the next question regarding previous position held do not throw up many surprises or unusual routes to principalship as 54.8% of now principals' most recent position was as vice or deputy principal, 19% were principal and/or chief executive at another college and 16.7% were directors of various areas of colleges, which is likely to be equivalent of second in command at many colleges, depending on their structure. Eight respondents preceded their current positions outside further education in various positions such as managing director of a work based learning company, positions with Ofsted as officer or director and as an independent consultant in education and skills. The length of time spent in this previous position by the respondents ranged from 18 months to 13 years with the average (mean) period of time in position being 5 years and 5 months indicating a longer average period of time spent at a level below principal than at principal status. All respondents have spent over 9 years in education as shown in Table 4.2:

**Table 4.2: Principals' years of experience in education**

| <b>Years experience in education</b> | <b>Respondents</b> |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 9 to 15 years                        | 14.3%              |
| 16 to 22 years                       | 28.6%              |
| 23 to 29 years                       | 19.0%              |
| 30 years or more                     | 38.1%              |

A wealth of experience is present in these respondents as one would expect as they have reached the pinnacle of their chosen career. This experience will undoubtedly have influenced the way in which the respondents perceive leadership, as they have worked with different leaders over the course of their careers. This influence will be explored in greater detail in the interview analysis.

The academic discipline of the respondents as classified into the groupings as shown in Table 3.2 indicate that over half of the participants (54.8%) come

from the “soft-pure” category of groupings including geography, history and economics, 22.6% from the “soft-applied” category from subjects such as law and a further 19.4% from “vocational-applied” subjects including sport and leisure. Only one of the participants had an academic background in the “hard-applied” category (biological sciences) and none at all came from the “hard-pure” category of pure sciences. Although the small sample size cannot lead to definitive conclusions, this data indicates that of those working as principals in further education in England only one from a “hard-pure/applied” background was willing to participate in the study. This data is represented in Figure 4.2.

**Figure 4.2: Academic discipline of principal/chief executive**

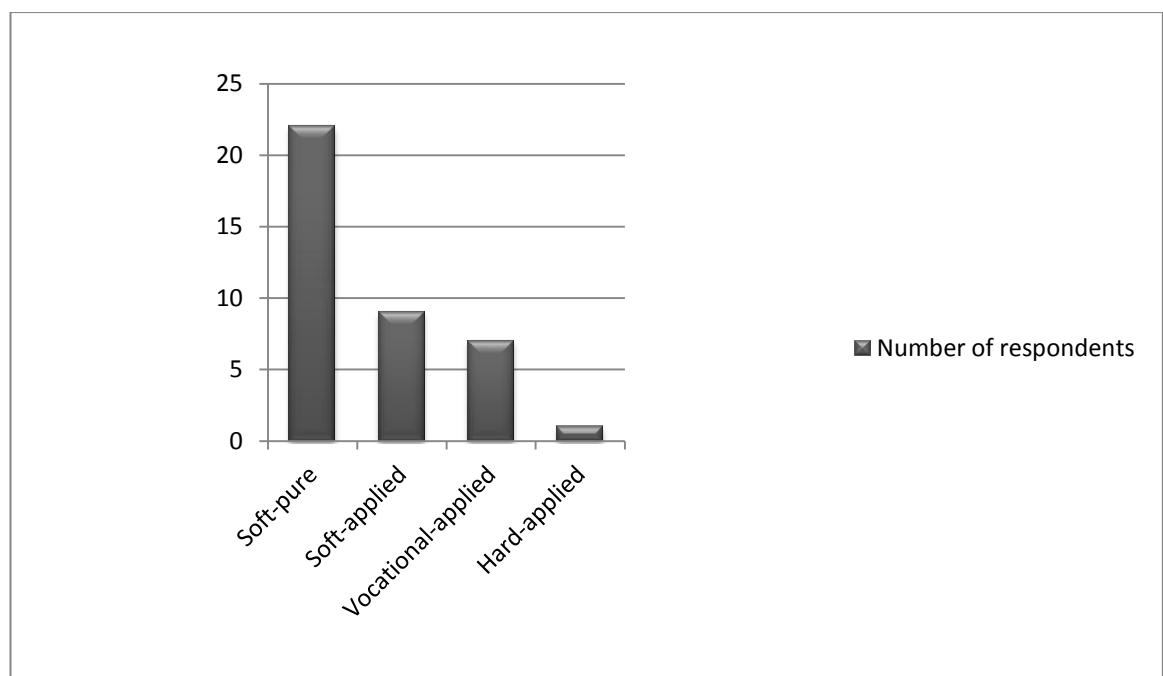


Figure 4.2 illustrates the large proportion of respondents that have studied in the “soft-pure” disciplines which it could be argued have been more traditionally associated with study at Sixth Form Colleges and Schools. This could be a reflection of the “mission drift” as described later in this section where FE colleges have expanded their curricula to include more academic subjects alongside technical and vocational provision.

When asked about positions held outside education, 32.1% of respondents indicated that they had never worked in another field with the remaining 67.9% having had experience in a number of varied occupations. These range from

civil servant to drama therapist, from solicitor to sports sabbatical officer and from business manager to production accountant for a television company. This range of jobs, whilst not allowing for patterns to emerge or conclusions to be drawn, do give a snapshot into the variety of employment backgrounds of those currently employed as principals in the FE sector. However, of those who have worked outside education, more than half (53.6%) have spent less than two years away from the sector and only six have spent more than nine years in other sectors. This reiterates the comments earlier of the need for extensive experience in the educational arena to become an FE principal.

#### **4.2.2 Principal's educational background**

The first question related to the educational establishment attended by the respondents. The most attended type of institution by participants of the survey was grammar school (51.2%). This could be interpreted in a number of ways such as being a reflection on the ability of grammar schools to produce leaders, the age of the respondents meaning that a larger number of grammar schools existed when they were of school age or merely that a non-proportionate number of grammar school attendees chose to complete the survey. The second highest number of responses indicated that 23.1% of participants went to comprehensive school while just two respondents attended secondary modern schools, five attended independent/private schools and only three experienced life at further education colleges. This last statistic indicates that, among the respondents to this survey at least, experiencing life as a student in an FE college does not very often lead to reaching the top of the profession in an FE college. This information is summarised in the Table 4.3:

**Table 4.3: Pre-18 Schools/Colleges attended**

|                            |    |
|----------------------------|----|
| Secondary Modern School    | 2  |
| Comprehensive School       | 9  |
| Private/Independent School | 5  |
| Grammar School             | 20 |
| Further Education College  | 3  |
| Sixth Form College         | 0  |

The overriding indication from this information is that selective education appears to prepare more FE leaders than non-selective education, at least for the respondents to this survey.

All respondents attended higher education establishments with the majority (71.7%) having been to university. Only 15% of the participants attended teacher training college with the remainder going to polytechnic or Higher Education College. Whilst the percentage who attended teacher training college is low; the prevalence of on the job training in further education means that attendance at specialist training providers is not extensive in the FE sector. In terms of the highest qualification attained, 70.7% of responding principals have gained at least a masters degree with 13.8% of those going on to achieve doctorates. All other respondents have bachelors' degrees. Again due the small sample size no conclusions can be drawn from this, it is just an indication of the attainment of 39 FE college principals. It may be that those with higher degrees are more likely to respond to requests for assistance with research as they empathise with, and would like to support, like-minded people seeking to gain higher qualifications.

The educational and professional backgrounds of the participants in the internet survey indicate that there is not as much professional experience outside the education sector as could be expected given the traditionally vocational nature of further education. It is also interesting to recognise how many of the respondents were educated in a selective school. It is possible that the make-up of further education college principals has shifted due to the "mission drift" that has taken place in education in recent years. The further education sector has expanded its curriculum provision in the last two decades by offering higher education courses such as HNDs and Foundation degrees, provision for 14-16 year olds through the increased flexibility programme with some colleges also competing with schools and sixth form colleges for A-level and International Baccalaureate students. These courses are offered alongside the more traditional technical and vocational routes and may mean a leader with a more academic background is suited to the modern further education college. A suggested hypothesis which could be subject to further research is that 'the changing nature of the FE sector is reflected by the changing nature of the backgrounds of FE leaders'.

### 4.2.3 Leadership practice

This section of the survey focuses on the leadership practice of the respondents. Participants were requested to indicate which of the three types of leadership as shown in Table 3.1 best described their leadership practice. The description of a transformational leader (Type A) was chosen by 50% of respondents, distributed leadership practice (Type B) as a preferred approach was chosen by 42.1% of the respondents with the remaining 7.9% choosing a managerial approach to leadership (Type C) as their most commonly used practice. One participant chose not to answer this question.

The greatest proportion (50%) of respondents chose to categorise their leadership as Type A, transformational. The leadership approach has obvious attractions such as the 'Four Is' (Bass and Avolio, 1994) as described in the literature review which aim to capture the "hearts and minds" (Muijs et al, 2006, p.88) of followers. Transformational leadership has proved to be a popular approach to consider in an educational context with recent research suggesting "...strong evidence to support the efficacy of transformational leadership in education where it exists" (Govindji and Linley, 2008, p.4). However, the same authors believe that "... this leadership style tends to be in its infancy in many further education colleges" (p.4) does not appear to be the case for 50% of this cohort of respondents, at least in their perception.

The results of this survey do nevertheless concur with Sawbridge's (2001) assertion that transformational leadership has been found to be "the leadership practice which is most written about in FE, often by principals themselves" (p.4).

The 42.1% of respondents who categorised themselves as distributed leaders (Type B), and therefore feel that their approach to leadership is a shared, social process indicates a desire to be seen as a leader who believes that their staff are able to contribute to the way in which the college is run.

As the review of the literature indicated distributed leadership has been interpreted in many forms. Some of the respondents to the survey may believe that their leadership is participative which, I have argued, appears to be more suited to smaller institutions where it is more practical for all members of the

community to actively participate in the decision-making process. Others may interpret my description of distributed leadership as being consultative leadership where prior senior management decisions are passed down to the lower levels of an organisation (Muijs et al, 2006). So although I have chosen to use a statement when describing Type B leadership which draws from Spillane's (2005) understanding of distributed leadership, it could still be open to interpretation. The interview process should allow further depth to be explored as principals have a varied approach to distributed leadership. (Lumby, 2003).

Whatever the intention of the respondents, which cannot be gleaned from an internet survey, this approach to leadership appears to have become popular in educational settings as more power is divested to all layers of an establishment's hierarchy (Harris and Spillane, 2008).

The discussion of distributed leadership in further education is a relatively new area (see Gregory 1996) and but has quickly become the preferred approach of institutions such as the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) and as such will have come to principals' attention through the numerous research projects carried out by this body.

When Gronn (2008) investigated the relevance and utility of distributed leadership, he indicated his belief that there is utility in and a future for the distributed leadership model. This appears to be the case for this cohort based on the number of principals categorising themselves as distributed leaders.

As stated in the literature review, it is apparent that distributed leadership is a descriptive concept rather than a prescriptive one. That is, it is a way of understanding what type of leadership is taking place in an institution rather than proposing a way of leading.

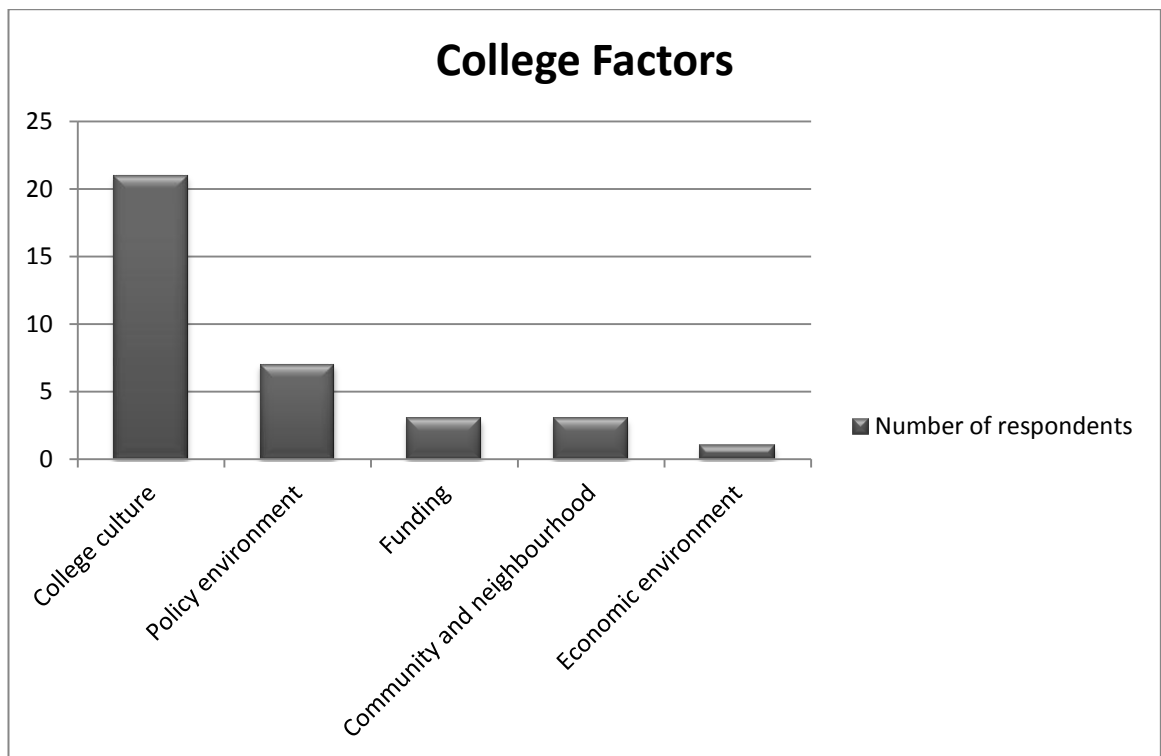
The small number of principals describing their approach to leadership as managerial is not a great surprise as it may not appear to be the most attractive of options when self-reflecting. This is reflected in the emphasis of this style of leadership being seen by some researchers as a negative approach to leading in further education (Hartley, 1997; Randle and Brady,



1997) as described in the literature review. What is clear from these three responses is that there is an indication that managerial leadership has not ceased in perception. Given that managerial leadership was at its height in terms of the volume of research and reported practice in the middle of the 1990s, it is perhaps surprising that there is any suggestion of its legacy surviving given the existence of so many other types of leadership. However, recent research by Dixon et al (2010) and Lambert (2011) indicates that managerial leadership is not a spent force due to factors such as funding constraints and changing government priorities. The changing financial circumstances of education in the UK as described in the introduction and the effect these may have on leadership practice are an area that can be explored in more detail in the interview stage of the research process. Half of the participants felt that they inspire and motivate their staff in their role as transformational leaders. This, of course, is self-reported opinion of how they lead their college and so needs to be explored further with those principals involved in the interview process.

Principals were then asked about other factors that had the most impact on the way in which they lead their college. The list of options was drawn from the college factors section of Figure 3.2. Over half of participants (53.8%) indicated that college culture was the most impactful factor with 17.9% responding that policy environment was of great importance. Joint third highest responses were funding (7.7%) and community and neighbourhood (7.7%) with economic environment being chosen by just one of the respondents. This data is represented in Figure 4.3.

**Figure 4.3: College factors impacting leadership practice**



Culture has been recognised as “... and elusive and diverse concept” (Lumby and Foskett, 2008, p.44) which has resulted in a range of conceptualisations. The various interpretations of the meaning of culture, specifically relating to education, include Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2000) definition of culture, “as the norms, values, beliefs and assumptions that shape members’ decisions and practices” (p.115) thus placing the responsibility of the organisation’s culture on the attitude and outlook of the organisation’s staff and how they practice. In a similar fashion, Mestry et al (2006) conclude that “the culture of a school is cemented by the attitudes of its educators, which motivate and sustain leadership behaviour, patterns of communication, cooperation and discipline, culture of teaching and learning, level of educator commitment, and quality of working life” (p.18). These definitions emphasise the need to understand the motivation of people within an organisation and the need to establish any link between culture and leadership, which has been recognised as problematic, “... understanding culture and its connection to leadership in education is a poorly researched field” (Lumby and Foskett 2008, p.53). However, the importance placed on culture by the respondents to the survey have a degree of resonance with Schein’s (1985) belief that “... the only task of a leader is to manage an institution’s culture” (p.2) and indicate a need for further

exploration of culture and leadership when analysing the interview data, where more detailed responses should allow a better understanding of participants' interpretations of culture in their institutions.

It is perhaps surprising that both funding and economic environment featured at such a low level of response given the climate in which the further education sector is operating. However, this is consistent with the respondents' lack of desire to label themselves as managerial leaders where an emphasis is placed on financial stability. In the 'other' category on the question of factors impacting leadership there were four responses: "My beliefs about how leadership works"; "Drive for quality"; "What I believe best serves the learners within the constraints we operate it e.g. govt policy, funding etc"; "Culture & economic environment - it is not all 'black & white'", the latter two indicating an interrelationship between factors that the respondents feel are of greater importance than any one individual influence. The respondents were then asked their opinion of the factor that has the second biggest impact on the leadership that they undertake. This gave a wider range of responses with the most popular response being Policy environment (25.6%) closely followed by Funding (23%). It could be argued that these factors have become more important in the time that the coalition government current at the time of writing have been in power and announced large cuts in funding and changes to education policy. However, as far as the respondents to this survey are concerned, they are more prevalent as secondary impacts than primary. Economic environment and Community and neighbourhood were joint third highest responses (15.4%) and College culture (10.3%) the fifth highest response. College governance garnered two responses having not a single response in the question regarding the most impact which is perhaps surprising given the way in which decisions are made in FE colleges. The 'other' responses to this question were "Student Success" and "Strength of the management team" both of which indicate a more 'bottom up' approach to leadership where the focus of leadership practice comes from levels below principalship.

#### **4.2.4 Relationship between Principal's background and leadership practice**

Establishing a relationship between the backgrounds of the respondents and the way in which they lead their college is not possible given the 19.6% response rate. However, any indications of possible relationships will help to triangulate similar findings gained from the more in depth stage of the research, the interviews. From the principals who described themselves as Type A, transformational leaders, there is a range of experience from one month to twelve and a half years as principal and between nine and thirty plus years in education. Interestingly, however, all but one of the principals who have been in post less than a year, that is seven out of eight respondents, chose Type A as their preferred practice. It could be argued that this is the most prevalent self-identified "current" way of leading which could be reflected by the content of the new principals' training programme. As two of these respondents are part of the interview stage this can be explored further. Those respondents categorising themselves as Type B, distributed leaders, again have a wide range of experience in post from thirteen months to ten years and five months and have worked in education for the same wide span as for Type B. All three Type C leaders have spent three years or less in post perhaps reflecting the re-emergence of managerialism which will be explored later in this chapter. It may of course just be the preferred position of those three individuals who have all spent time working outside education as a solicitor, as a local government officer and in sales. In terms of the influence of academic discipline on leadership, the principals in the "soft-pure" category of vocational groupings describe themselves as Types A, B and C in a similar proportion to the whole group of respondents. The one respondent from the "hard-applied" category described them self as a Type A leader. Those in the "soft-applied" category have a slight bias towards being Type A leaders (57.1%) in comparison with the whole group and contribute 2 of the 3 Type C leaders, both coming from the same academic discipline, law. In the "vocational-applied" category two-thirds of respondents felt that they were Type B leaders with the other third describing themselves as Type A leaders. This leaning towards distributed leadership in this grouping could arguably be attributed to the need to work in teams in areas such as sport and leisure and

in social care. There are no obvious relationships between the institutions in which the respondents studied and their leadership practice or the level of education they have attained and the way in which they lead.

These comments are conjecture and highlight the difficulty of reaching firm conclusions from the survey and show the need to gain more in depth insight in the interview stage of the research process.

#### **4.2.5 Relationship between 'college and external factors' and leadership practice**

The factor recorded as being the one with the most impact on respondents' leadership is college culture. Of the 53.7% of participants who saw that as the most impactful factor, 57.9% saw themselves as Type A leaders, 36.8% as Type B and 5.3% as Type C thus showing a slight bias towards transformational leadership being the preferred style of those who see college culture of great importance in their college. College culture is likely to be of importance to those wishing to display transformational leadership tendencies as they are likely to need the whole college to 'buy in' to their way of doing things. Indeed, in their study of transformational leadership, Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) claim that organisational culture is one of the most important factors for a leader to control and understand when exerting influence as a transformational leader. For the second most impactful factor of policy environment (17.9% of respondents), half categorised themselves as Type A leaders, one third as Type B leaders and one sixth as Type C leaders. This is a similar proportion to the overall statistics of the survey. The survey shows no great relationship between leadership practice and 'college factors' which again will be explored in more depth in the interview stage of the research process.

The internet survey was designed to generate a snapshot of the backgrounds from which current further education principals have come. This has been achieved for the 39 respondents showing a range of backgrounds and influences on their leadership. The survey has also given an insight into how the principals perceive their leadership practice. This will be compared with existing literature and previous research findings in a later section of this chapter. In addition to this data collected, the survey also allowed a means of

access to principals willing to be interviewed in the second stage of the research. This proved to be successful as eight principals agreed to be interviewed.

### 4.3 Interview Findings and Analysis

Each of the eight Further Education (FE) College Principals interviewed is briefly described in Table 4.4. The Ofsted rating is that achieved in the college's most recent inspection, from the four possible grades of outstanding, good, satisfactory and unsatisfactory. The size of the college is as defined by Ofsted from the categories large, medium and small. The leadership type reflects the response given in the internet survey and the vocational grouping is taken from their response to their main academic discipline.

**Table 4.4: Characteristics of the eight Principals interviewed**

| Principal | Pseudonym | Size of College | Ofsted Rating | Time in post | Reported Leadership Type | Vocational Grouping |
|-----------|-----------|-----------------|---------------|--------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| A         | Alice     | Large           | Good          | 7 years      | B                        | Vocational-applied  |
| B         | Bob       | Medium          | Good          | 10 years     | A                        | Soft-pure           |
| C         | Chloe     | Large           | Good          | 5 months     | A                        | Soft-applied        |
| D         | Dan       | Large           | Satisfactory  | 1 year       | A                        | Vocational-applied  |
| E         | Edward    | Large           | Satisfactory  | 7 years      | B                        | Vocational-applied  |
| F         | Fran      | Medium          | Satisfactory  | 18 months    | A                        | Soft-pure           |
| G         | Graham    | Medium          | Good          | 2 years      | B                        | Soft-pure           |
| H         | Helen     | Medium          | Good          | 9 years      | B                        | Hard-applied        |

Table 4.4 gives an indication of the range of colleges in which the principals work with half being defined as large and half as medium. Five of the colleges have been graded as good (grade 2) and three as satisfactory (grade 3). So

there is a reasonable spread of representation in terms of size and quality of college although there are no small colleges and no outstanding (grade 1) or unsatisfactory (grade 4) colleges' principals represented in the interview stage of the research. It could be suggested that the interviewees represent the colleges striving for improvement as they seek outstanding status for their college.

#### **4.3.1 Interview analysis**

In the literature review, it was suggested with reference to literature by Becher (1987 and 2001) that leaders from different vocational groupings would practice leadership in different ways. It was proposed that those from 'soft-pure' backgrounds would display transformational (Type A) leadership characteristics. This was the case for two of the three participants in the interview stage of the research. It was also proposed that those from 'hard-applied' backgrounds would display distributed (Type B) leadership characteristics. This was the case for one participant in the interview stage of the research. The suggestion that those falling into the 'soft-applied' grouping would be Type C (managerial) leaders did not prove to be the case, based on participant's perception, for the one participant in this category. Both Type A and B leaders were represented in the 'vocational-applied' grouping of three participants confirming the suggestion that this grouping could proffer a range of leadership practices. It has to be noted that these discussions are based on the participants' perceptions of their leadership practice and as has been seen throughout this analysis there can be contradictions relating to how the participants believe they lead and the way that their comments may highlight a different practice.

This section aims to interpret the data collected during the interviews looking at how the participants present themselves as a certain type of leader and whether what they say about their leadership appears to collate with their perception of their practice. The key questions of the impact of educational and professional background on their leadership practice are also addressed.

## **Principal A (Alice)**

Alice described herself as a Type B leader in the internet survey, meaning that she believes a distributed approach to leadership is her most regularly practiced approach. The description of distributed leadership as stated in the literature review indicates that all staff are involved in the leadership of the institution and that leadership is collective, educative, causative and ethical (Harris and Spillane, 2008). Alice's perception of the way in which she leads her institution is that she is very keen to see people at all levels take responsibility. When describing the reasons for buying in help from a management company Alice commented that "... it was a big leap of faith – we decided that we'd be happy to devolve to people so that people took responsibility and make people personally accountable and that's the main thing we got them in for." When explaining her desire to change the culture of the organisation "... to ensure that people take more responsibility and are accountable because even though we've made a lot of changes there's a tendency towards, you know, somebody hasn't done something". When asked whether this approach to leadership was a change for the organisation Alice commented that:

I'm asking them to take the responsibility that I thought they should have based on their job titles, job descriptions. We pay people quite a lot of money – when you're paying them over thirty thousand pounds you expect them to take responsibility and a lot of people haven't done. I know in other organisations it's convenient not to, isn't it? So that's what we're trying.

When asked specifically whether she felt this approach fitted with her perception of herself as a distributed leader, Alice justified her response by stating:

When I've analysed what's wrong with the college, the key issue was that there was a need for people to accept personal responsibility and have priorities and their responsibility to do that and so that hopefully fits in with what I said.



The sense of frustration at the slow speed of culture change at the institution, that Alice has led for seven years, is evident when listening to the recording of the interview and re-reading the transcript. Alice perceives her leadership practice as distributed but does it fit the theories of Harris et al (2007), Leithwood et al (2007) and Spillane (2005)? Alice certainly believes, as do these researchers, that organisations can change and develop when undertaking distributed leadership as long as certain cultural and structural barriers are removed. In Alice's case the culture of people not taking personal responsibility is one that she is determined to remove. The whole college approach to distributed leadership as described by Alice also fits in with the theories of Harris et al (2007), Leithwood et al (2007) and Spillane (2005) as she stated:

This goes to the top of the organisation and actually my view was that there are things I need to do and there are things that lots of other people need to do and let's share all that out – make people responsible for what we've agreed is their responsibility. It's that big issue of taking personal ownership.

So it seems that some of the approach to leadership practice as undertaken by Alice does not quite match with the understanding of distributed leadership as described in the literature review. The type of leadership Alice undertakes more closely matches the description given by Lumby (2005, p.1) – “distributed leadership is often distribution of operational responsibilities rather than a distribution of power”.

However, there is also some evidence of other types of leadership that Alice indicates she practices. The word 'responsibility' was used 12 times by Alice during the course of the interview, most often to highlight the importance of staff taking more responsibility for their actions. Although I believe that the interviewee saw this as a distribution of power, it could be argued that this emphasis on taking responsibility is a managerial approach to leadership. There is a focus on accountability, meeting targets and adherence to job descriptions which very much fits with the model of managerial leadership practice. Her approach appears to have many of the characteristics of managerial leadership such as delegation and consultation and appears to

concur with Lumby's (2003) assertion that senior managers support distributed leadership but that the actions which follow show variation in interpretation. Despite this reservation, however, the overriding theme regarding Alice's leadership practice is that she is attempting a distributed approach to leadership at her college, as she stated in the internet survey.

The route to Alice's appointment as college leader is one which needs to be examined. Alice attended a girls' grammar school until the point in the lower sixth studying for A-levels when she decided, for a variety of reasons, to go to the technical college next door. This influenced her initial decision to work in the further education sector as she stated that:

I was a middle class kid in a class with mainly apprentices – I could really see what opportunity FE gave and really did affect me – I didn't realise how much until I went back to work in FE.

After a career break to start a family, Alice returned to the sector as a part-time lecturer in business studies which places her in the 'vocational-applied' category of disciplinary groupings. When this position became full-time Alice undertook her teacher training. Although she felt that "... that taught me how not to teach – the lecturers were really awful – they gave no strategies for managing in the classroom" it did allow her to "work with men, especially managers, because that was a skill in those days". This acquisition of skills allowed Alice, she believed, to progress up the management scale. The influence of her early education on the way in which she leads should not be overstated but it is possible that having a background in business studies might lead Alice towards maintaining a focus on college finances as a priority. The larger influence on Alice's career in terms of education appears to be her completion of a Masters degree from an American University. She felt that it moulded her leadership practice as:

...it's one of the best things I've ever done and that really was with an amazing group of people and an amazing group of lecturers and in terms of exploring ways of dealing with people, giving feedback, training, developmental work and actually work-based stuff.

Alice felt that this helped her develop as a leader as it allowed her to improve her understanding of organisations based on the experience she had.

So the major influence of educational background on Alice's leadership as she identified is based on her experience of studying at a further education college, completing her teacher training with male managers and completing a Masters degree with people who inspired her. Her time at an FE college led her to believe that education gave opportunities to all, the latter two experiences allowed her to acquire skills pertinent to another type of leadership, transformational, such as dealing with people, training and giving feedback.

Another professional experience that Alice feels had influenced her leadership approach is that she has:

... done virtually every job in FE that anybody's ever done, so I obviously ... understand the stresses and pressures and responsibilities that you should have in each of the jobs so I think that's probably shaped my leadership style.

The way in which this is evident is that Alice feels she is "empathetic and understanding" towards people. This empathy is not always evident in the interview with comments such as "I can quickly get to the end of my patience with people who don't take responsibility for themselves" and "I can't stand those who whinge about not getting to where they want to be because you have to take these things and sort them yourself – there's nothing given and that's the sort of thing that really annoys me – it's that personal responsibility again", reiterating this emphasis on devolution of accountability to the whole organisation.

It is evident that Alice is determined to practice her brand of distributed leadership which emphasises personal responsibility and accountability at all levels. This leadership has been influenced by both her professional and educational background in both the values she has and the skills she has acquired in a long career in the FE sector. When asked in the internet survey about other influences on her leadership practice, Alice felt that both college culture and the economic environment had a part to play. In the interview Alice stated that she had attempted to change the culture of the college to fit

her preferred leadership approach and that this was an ongoing process as described above. Alice felt that the economic environment has been an issue over the last 12 years as "...there've been reductions, funding cuts, change every year and what you need to counter that is being flexible and responsive to change and you can give more than you can really afford". This influence therefore is one that Alice does not believe has a great impact on her quest to ensure that distributed leadership is practiced at her college.

Alice's perception of her leadership practice is not wholly borne out by her comments. There are suggestions of both managerial and transformational characteristics in the practice she describes emphasising the problematic nature of inferring an individual's approach to leadership from their self-report.

### **Principal B (Bob)**

Bob described himself as a Type A leader in the internet survey meaning that he believes a transformational approach to leadership is his most regularly practiced approach. When reminded of this response in the interview, Bob felt that this description of him as being 'a leader who inspires, motivates and encourages a culture of questioning and intellectual stimulation' would be recognised by some people but pointed out that:

I think one of the things about leadership – it depends on whether the observer interacts with you on a regular basis. So senior management colleagues would absolutely recognise that [style of leadership] but some other people who have other functions in the college simply wouldn't.

As described in the literature review, transformational leaders aim to be inspirational to bring out the best in their sub-ordinates or as Bob described:

I suspect that they [college staff] would all say that I'm approachable, but I've got the attention span of a gnat; I don't spend much time sat at my desk. I try to wander around the college because I think it's incredibly important to be seen.

This importance to be seen has made Bob approachable in his view and fits in with the transformational leader's desire to encourage questioning. Bob commented on this situation stating that:

I do have the responsibility to make final decisions so I'm quite happy to create an environment where people question and test. I think it's important but there needs to be control otherwise you've got anarchy. I think the leadership team should question anything and everything. There's no point in asking the opinions of the team and then ignoring it.

This comment relates to intellectual stimulation, one of the 'Four Is' as identified by Bass and Avolio (1994), promoting a culture of questioning and challenge which is an important element of leading with a transformational approach. Bob was also eager to emphasise his investment in the people who work at his institution stating that:

People are the most expensive resource so you've got to be careful about the kind of culture you operate in, in order to ensure that that culture enables effective working.

This individualised consideration (another of Bass and Avolio's 'Four Is'), where support is given to individuals to allow them to develop, is achieved by being "laid-back... open" according to Bob. Bob backed this up by stating that:

Ofsted and Investors in People recognise that we're very transparent in everything we do. We pride ourselves on having been IIP champions from day one as well as being exemplars of good practice in how we deal with people. We make sure that our staff are looked after to get the best out of them.

Bob feels that this approach is a reflection of himself as he has become more "laid-back, less anxious" than he was when he started as principal 10 years ago. He has been able to give people more autonomy as he has stated that he has now "gathered a team around me that are people that I trust implicitly". This is imperative in undertaking transformational leadership as Chirichello (1999, p.3) states if a leader is not careful, that this approach to leadership is "...more likely to be accepted by the leader than the led".

There seems to be no compelling reason to argue, based on his responses in the interview, that Bob is not the transformational leader that he claims to be. He indicates in his comments the impact his leadership has on others while speaking about the four Is of Bass and Avolio. The influence of professional and educational background on this leadership practice will now need to be examined.

Bob's academic discipline classifies him in the 'soft-pure' vocational grouping. When asked about the influence this has had on his leadership practice Bob was keen to emphasise the skills acquired studying and teaching this subject:

One of the things about [my academic discipline] is that you're both numerate and literate so I'm equally comfortable dealing with stats and finance as I am dealing with words and the written stuff. I guess that's not always the case with people who are from a science background or a straightforward arts background. I think [my academic discipline] has always spanned the arts and the social sciences and there's a scientific bent and lots of words

He is confident that his discipline has allowed him to gain skills that are useful in the role of college principal. The influence of educational discipline was not reinforcing any positive influence from early education. In fact the main impact Bob's grammar school experience had was that to convince him "...that there was more to life than straight academic subjects. My education lacked anything creative, anything alternative" thus leading Bob into a career in further education where he believes there is much more variety of subject and a wider range of students are given more opportunities. This school background has similarities with Alice's in that it led both principals away from grammar schools into the further education arena.

Another common thread running between these first two interviewees is that their careers have been spent solely in further education. Bob always wanted to work in the education sector and after having a brief experience teaching in a school which he found to be "hideous" went into the college sector. Bob's professional experience in the FE sector has influenced the way in which he leads to the extent that he believes he delegates more than he did ten years ago as a result of ensuring all those around him are aware of the values of the

college which are “providing equitable access and opportunities for all” and “high quality teaching and learning.”

Other influences on the leadership practice Bob undertakes were stated in the survey as culture and policy environment. When questioned about culture, Bob reiterated once more his desire for the college to provide open communication channels to ensure that the college will be able to operate to the values he holds to be important. Bob was outspoken regarding the impact of government policy in the FE sector stating that:

...the thing is whatever it is I may or may not want to do, whatever my priorities are for managing the college or staff, all of that is tempered by the policy framework outside.

He continued:

So what the priorities are outside in relation to the general lunacy of a succession of frankly demented ministers who come up with some of the most bizarre ideas all of which involve re-focussing what we do – the way that I have overcome that intellectually in my own way is that the basis of what we feel remains unchanged – teaching and learning and providing opportunities remain untouched as that’s not something that ministers can cock up.

Bob felt it important that his vision for the college remain intact despite his lack of faith in the government:

These have to remain the college’s touchstones otherwise there’s no point in us doing anything – if we can’t be true to those values then there’s no point at all in existing – so you take what policy framework and work within that context whilst remaining true to the underpinning values that we believe in – teaching and learning will always be at the centre of what we do – the day that it isn’t is the day I need to give up.

The passion for the core values of the college comes through in this statement along with the determination to ensure that his brand of leadership will allow this to happen despite any external distractions. The skills acquired during his time both as a student and as a long-serving practitioner in the FE sector along

with the values he feels to be important have influenced Bob's leadership practice. This style of leadership concurs with the transformational leadership model described by Lumby (2005, p.151) as it "... appears to offer the hope of democratic, values-based and inclusive leadership" and also "...promotes a widespread assumption that a common vision and set of values amongst faculty can and must be achieved as a prerequisite for leadership effectiveness" (Begley, 2004, p.4).

### **Principal C (Chloe)**

Chloe described herself as a Type A leader in the internet survey meaning that she believes a transformational approach to leadership is her most regularly practiced approach. The theme that emerges when studying the transcript of this interview is the significance Chloe places on the importance of influencing other people. This recurring idea of both idealised influence and inspirational motivation as described in Bass and Avolio's (1994) explanation of transformational leadership is evident in Chloe's description of the impact she believes both her educational and professional background have had on the way in which she practices leadership.

When initially asked to comment on the influence of her education on current leadership practice, Chloe was not convinced that her schooling had an impact on her leadership stating that:

I think it's probably more the values that I had as a child and my father – he took the lead I suppose. I think that it's those values that are hard work, drive, the influencing on other people; obviously it comes from them rather than any school background.

This emphasis on the impact of family background influencing Chloe's values is one that is apparent throughout the interview and is clearly of central importance to Chloe's value set. Despite Chloe's belief that her early education has had no effect on her leadership practice, "I can't say that was down to the school – I don't think the school influenced me", it did give her the first experience of leading – "I was at a girls' boarding school. I was in the sixth form as head of house so I had some form of leadership, I suppose and I've always been fairly assertive and keen to get involved". This positive



experience and the way that she managed to turn a negative experience into a challenge by proving her school teachers wrong stating that “school wasn’t that enjoyable an experience and all the way up school I was told that ‘she won’t go to university’, ‘she won’t get A levels’ – of course I did all of that”. This competitive spirit and being able to rise to a challenge is another theme of the interview.

When describing her time at university, Chloe again believed the experience to have had little impact – “I don’t think the university had a huge influence” but despite this feeling got involved in a leadership role as treasurer of the junior common room which increased her confidence in dealing with people thus increasing the skills set required to be a college principal. She did believe that she “... wanted to make a difference to something while [I] was at university” although she was not sure how to make that difference at the time.

Chloe believes that the greater influence on both the acquisition of skills and the confirmation of values that have led her to display the leadership approach she now adopts has been her professional experience. These experiences have largely been outside the educational sector, where Chloe had two separate careers.

When describing her first career Chloe believed that it “...had a huge influence on the way I lead now and my leadership generally because to get in to start [in my first job was] extremely competitive” emphasising her strong competitive spirit started at school which assisted in her quest to rise to the role of FE principal. This position enabled Chloe to gain an insight into the lives of other people and to empathise with those who had a less sheltered upbringing. Chloe believes that gaining this insight into the different types of lives people lead has helped in her career in FE where people come from different backgrounds than her own:

We were taught in a way that ensured we really cared and needed to care about the people we worked with and not just walk in and assume that [because of the position you are in] everyone would respect you.

This experience opened Chloe’s eyes to the “access for all” ethos that she believes is so important in further education providers:

I spent nine months with people coming from deprived areas of the country... that taught me a lot about how you offer opportunities to people and what sort of opportunities.

This inclusive element to leadership is commented upon later in the interview when referring to the college in which Chloe now leads – “we are an all inclusive college and we’ve got to be a friendly, all inclusive management”. In terms of the fit with the transformational leadership model, this concern for people could be categorised as another of Bass and Avolio’s (1994) ‘Four Is’, individualised consideration, which takes into account support for individuals to allow them to develop to meet new goals and challenges.

In a second career outside education, the acquisition of skills and influence on ways of leading were put forward by Chloe. One of the most important skills acquired in this position, which Chloe feels is vital in her role as college principal, is that of financial acumen. Her company was spending £500 million on IT but it was poorly managed as costs were not being allocated and decisions not being communicated. Chloe recognised the need for improved communication at all levels and became interested in coaching:

I had this guy who I had to coach and that probably opened my eyes to the coaching side of things and why that was important... my skills were always much more on the how do you manage the people to motivate them to do their job rather than how [to do my job].

This understanding of what motivates people is seen as vital to the leadership that Chloe prefers to practice:

You had to work out what people were motivated by, whether motivated by money ..., by a secure job, by the thing they enjoyed doing.

The ability to understand what motivates people, what Bass and Avolio (1994) call inspirational motivation, is vital in Chloe’s opinion and is summarised by her comment that “I do think those are the sorts of things I learnt when I was there [in my job], it was really how you get the best out of people.”

When commenting on her initial foray into the education sector, Chloe said that she felt that the way in which she could influence and motivate people was

“totally different to [my previous jobs]” but that her skills were transferable and adaptable to this different environment.

In addition to the ability to understand the individual motivators, Chloe felt that what she called “leadership management development” makes a difference and this is something that she has brought to her role as college principal. This again accentuates her self perception as a transformational leader as individual needs and wants are addressed.

This belief in individuals is in contrast, in Chloe’s opinion, to her predecessor who was more autocratic, whereas Chloe “... was the side of the team who said consult, collaborate, coach and I’ve always been quite key on coaching”.

Chloe also believes that this professional experience has assisted her in her approach to decision making in her current role:

I suppose the other thing I learnt in those sorts of goals [motivators] is that making decisions is a really key part of being a leader [and] that a lot of organisations fail because they have no one in it being decisive.

Whilst appearing to show many of the attributes of a transformational leader, Chloe understood that she has “still got some work to do on defining leadership, what leadership means and what characteristics people have to have as leaders” and that because of her background outside the education sector, others may see her as a more managerial leader:

I’m sure being [in another industry] gives me a certain leadership style which is slightly different to a teaching style and I have been labelled as one of your very business orientated [leaders] by another principal.

Chloe herself is not wholly convinced that the transformational leadership model is one that she practices when referring to her attempt to change the culture of the college:

The culture we started to move towards was distributed leadership – you’re responsible for your area, you lead it, you take the decisions, yes there are some decisions that have to be made further up but most of it is down to you, and will give you all the support but that’s what we want you to do.

This interaction between transformational and distributed leadership is described by Muijs et al (2006) as 'shared transformational leadership' which "... is seen as leading to reform and change in a more sustained and sustainable way" (p.101). It allows the involvement of staff at lower levels but the vision is retained at the top of the organisation.

It is clear from Chloe's comments that both educational and professional background have influenced the leadership she practices. It appears that the larger impact has been the professional experience gained in positions outside education which have allowed skills to be acquired and values confirmed.

Other factors that Chloe felt influenced her leadership are college culture which she has been trying to change in her short time in post and the strength of the management team. Chloe believes that having a strong team around her has allowed her to lead in her preferred style which I have described as shared transformational leadership.

### **Principal D (Dan)**

Dan described himself as a Type A leader in the internet survey, meaning that he believes a transformational approach to leadership is his most regularly practiced approach. Dan had been in the position, his first role as principal, for less than a year at the time of interview and was not entirely sure of the leadership approach he had practiced in his time in post. He felt that in his previous position as vice principal he was influenced by his leader:

[I was] very much a part of the style that the principal who I worked to, that she wanted to adopt and that was a very distinct and very particular style that suited her, and I think that I've certainly picked up methods that she used, techniques, styles that she adopted.

However as a recently appointed principal in his own right, Dan has changed the way he operates to suit his style:

[I] knew very well that I couldn't be authentic in adopting all of those myself and had to choose a style that actually seemed to make sense to me and I'm still adjusting that, it's not a fixed quantity in the sense that it

is only one thing because I keep needing to adjust it to the things that go wrong here and the types of problem I encounter.

This hints at the need to find an approach to suit him, stating that "...it's still something I'm working on and I probably will have to keep working on it for some time to come I rather think". Despite this uncertainty, there are indications regarding the way in which Dan leads his college. He was eager to point out the areas of leadership practice that he did not believe in:

I don't subscribe to certain types of leadership. I don't believe in a very forceful performance management approach in a college. I don't believe particularly in the assertion of hierarchy as a way of running a college and things like that. I've seen those happen and seen them take colleges forward but only so far and create a great deal of despondency and difficulty in dealing with other things in the organisation.

This understanding of the practice that Dan is not keen to demonstrate suggests that it is unlikely that he will approach leadership in a managerial fashion where performance management and hierarchy are very much to the fore. Further comments regarding the approach to leadership that Dan is attempting to practice lend themselves towards the transformational practice proposed in Dan's completion of the internet survey:

I do find myself wanting to lead an organisation that believes in itself and believes in its people and believes in its students in the way that gives them the freedom to thrive.

This is in accord with Muijs et al's (2006) view of transformational leadership aiming to capture the "hearts and minds" which is reiterated in comments such as:

What I learnt from my previous job actually, was creating a culture of reflective practice, promoting success, giving people self belief and a degree of professional autonomy in their roles would actually give much more progress than standing over people with a big stick was my view of it.

Dan sees his leadership role as “having an honest conversation with people” to ensure that he is able to inspire, motivate and influence them which will allow “a mature and honest organisation”. These comments again fit the description of a transformational leader to a greater extent than the other two types considered in this research.

Dan’s professional experience has solely been in the further education sector having worked in the skills for life sector and therefore being categorised in the vocational applied discipline grouping. When asked of the impact his professional background has had on his leadership practice, Dan responded by highlighting his belief in access for all as other principals have also mentioned. He said:

I always champion the underdog, I always believe in fairness, trying to build equalities into running the organisation. A very important part of my professional identity, and like I say it’s probably done most in terms of developing a set of values in me, is about equalities, about reaching out, about promoting disadvantage and making sure that you are behaving in a just way that doesn’t accidentally create really difficult consequences for the least advocated people in the organisation or in society. So I suppose there is a value set that’s come through there.

This reference to both members of the college community and those in the wider community is a theme that Dan was eager to emphasise throughout the interview. He believes that his values were gained through his professional life and before that through his school, university and parents as he stated:

All of those things have probably come together to help to promote that value set that has made me want to be a skills for life practitioner, made me want to be a community educator and also made me want to contribute at a leadership level, that was something I could bring to the table with a degree of confidence at least. So I think all of that background, upbringing, probably conspired to create a set of beliefs that actually informed the way I work.

As with many of the interviewees, Dan does not think his early education at school in particular has shaped his leadership practice.

When asked about other factors influencing his leadership practice Dan believed that the greatest impact is college culture, which he is trying to change so that "...we all hold each other to account for that kind of excellence because ... you still don't let yourself off from wanting to run a great college ... it's still got to be great but it's how you get there".

The other impact mentioned was community and neighbourhood which Dan stated had an effect on the courses offered by the college and the way in which the college responded to demand:

We've got a duty, a business need, and all sorts of things that make it imperative that we've locked into our community. That's why you have a further education system, if you don't have that rootedness, and that responsiveness to where you are then why bother?

He continued to explain why he felt this was important:

It's an inspection criteria for colleges to look at how responsive they are and rightly so otherwise our purpose is much looser and we just become a business in a rather sterile way whereas actually it's our job to advantage people.

Dan's commitment to the college community both in terms of staff and students and the external community was evident throughout the interview and is reflected in his understanding of his approach to leadership. His professional background and, to a lesser extent, his educational background have had an impact on the transformational leadership being practiced.

### **Principal E (Edward)**

Edward described himself as a Type B leader in the internet survey, meaning that he believes a distributed approach to leadership is his most regularly practiced approach. His understanding of the distributed leadership model emphasises his use of delegation in the role of college principal. For example when referring to the way in which his leadership has developed in the seven years in post Edward stated:

I think as a middle manager and as an aspiring upwardly mobile manager I was probably much more direct, hands on and wanted to

know everything that was going on and made sure that I did know everything that was going on. I think it's almost inevitable but I think it's a style that I've been comfortable to do that I've been much more comfortable to delegate and delegating an awful lot more than I ever thought I would.

He believes that this approach to leadership has been necessary on a practical level following the growth of the college through merger:

The college did become bigger so the very hands on approach that I had in the early years to put my stamp on the place changed almost inevitably into a much more delegated approach because we're a much more scattered, much more diffuse organisation and that's the leadership style I believe I've had to adopt because otherwise you end up working a 100 hour week and you are no use to anybody.

This delegation of responsibilities and the accountability at lower levels that follows have meant that Edward has had to support staff to develop and have trust in their abilities to perform, as evident in this comment:

I have a great deal of faith and delegated confidence in my senior colleagues associated with the curriculum so I think I've become more choosy while developing a style where I delegate more but I'm also more comfortable to delegate more.

There are elements to Edward's perception of his leadership practice that suggest a managerial approach, for example when describing criticism he has received from staff within the college regarding the use of external performance targets:

There are those internally who are saying that's far too systematic, that far too based upon external measures, we shouldn't be dancing to their tune. My argument is wouldn't you all feel better if we had a much better rating amongst those external evaluations so more people locally and sub-regionally were looking at our results and saying crikey they're doing better don't you all want to be part of an organisation that is deemed to be doing well?



The managerial approach is also hinted at in comments on the performance of the college regarding the setting of targets:

It was about putting down roots all over the college where people took responsibility and ownership but guided by clear directional lines, a clear strategic framework, a clear set of values and behaviours against which people have a local check mark.

It is also evident in this quote:

We've got to be more efficient, so we've got to do more with less but we've also got to do it better and that's really quite a very difficult twin prong to hit people with.

This focus on efficiency, however, is perhaps expected given the cuts in the further education sector described elsewhere.

When questioned on the impact of educational background on his leadership practice Edward firstly misinterpreted the question to explain the impact of his professional experience, being as it has been solely within the further education sector:

I come from a career in education and that has, I'm absolutely clear, has given me a feel about leadership at the top of an organisation having worked in a number of educational establishments and I suppose you sort of make either sub-conscious or conscious judgements about what works for you and what doesn't work for you and I've only observed that in educational settings so that's bound to have had an influence on leadership style

Edward believes that the impact of this career in education on his leadership has been partly due to the observation of others and partly due to the understanding of the circumstances in which he has worked. The extent of the impact from his professional background was not as great for Edward as his involvement in sport from a young age:

In the context of sport, I've always had very clear views and that seems to have been expressed on the field of play and that has had the biggest impact on my leadership style because I'm a great believer in

teams, in delegated responsibility and people taking responsibility and their bit of the job but strong leadership with a clear direction is absolutely critical to that team's success.

He stated that he believed the influence of sport from his time at school throughout his career had been greater than his education:

If there's a philosophy around influence that would be the one [participating in sport], not the fact that I went through grammar school and university.

Edward believes that the skills acquired whilst being involved in sport have served him well in his career:

One of the tricks of leadership is to spot where a bit of the team, the organisation, is underperforming because that's the job of the chief executive.

He believes that this "philosophy" has been the backbone of his professional career as he would "... give someone who is underperforming or needs to develop some skills to perform better; I would give them the opportunity to develop. I would support them in that." He continued with the supporting ethos to his leadership by saying that "... there's a very clear spectrum there and I'd put myself very much towards the developmental spectrum rather than the let's get rid and let's get some readymade replacement in".

Edward does recognise, through feedback received from external sources such as Ofsted and internally, that there are negative views of his leadership practice:

[We've] created a smashing college but it's not moving fast enough and if there's one criticism of the style I've adopted it's probably been too consultative and at times too delegated.

This confirms some critics' views of distributed leadership which argue that the strength of leadership can be diluted if spread too thinly as there is an attempt to divest power to all levels of the establishment's hierarchy (Harris and Spillane, 2008). It is also important to note that researchers such as Drodge (2002) warn that distributed leadership should not be confused with

consultation, which some studies in further education have shown to be used more to communicate prior management decisions to staff than to involve them in decision making. Edward's comments on the pace of change also concur with the argument put forward in the literature review that distributed leadership can take time to change an institution's culture.

As with six of the other seven interviewees, Edward felt that college culture had an impact on the way in which he could lead his college commenting:

It was a very top down approach which was ... this idea of leaders as heroes and therefore it's hands on with everything because they can do it best and I just didn't think that the college had been given the opportunity ... to flourish at lower and managerial level and I suppose my leadership style is influenced by the fact that I wanted to create a culture of people at lower levels within the organisation taking pride in and responsibility for the performance in their areas.

Edward felt that he needed people at all levels to take more responsibility in his role as a leader with a distributed approach which he explained:

I've tried to engage in a number of focus groups and a number of team building exercises and so on to help people understand that they must have that buy in at lower level because if the head goes and it was only the head that was coming up with the ideas or rejecting ideas or about the pace and tone and style of the college,... then everything else evaporates around it.

This belief in changing culture to fit in with a principal's preferred mode of leadership is a recurring theme in the interviews.

Edward was the only interviewee who ranked student success in the top two factors in the internet survey that have influenced his leadership practice. He summarises his view on this focus in this comment:

They [academic staff] think all they've got responsibility for is the number of students they have in front of them for every hour on the timetable each day – so it's about getting that cross college, entire college approach that says we all have a stake in this [student success].

Edward's perception of his leadership practice as distributed is not wholly confirmed by the comments he made in the interview. Much of the description of his leadership practice suggests a more managerial approach where he delegates responsibility to lower levels of the organisation to focus on achieving student success.

His belief in teamwork and the development of staff, however, do fit Harris and Spillane's (2008) criteria for recognising a distributed leader. The difficulty of categorising Edward into one approach to leadership highlights the problematic nature of the concepts used in this study.

The influence of his professional and educational background is apparent in the values he has regarding the importance of teamwork and people taking responsibility and the skills and knowledge he has acquired in his thirty plus years in the FE sector.

### **Principal F (Fran)**

Fran described herself as a Type A leader in the internet survey meaning that she believes a transformational approach to leadership is her most regularly practiced approach. With an academic discipline in the soft pure vocational grouping and a professional career solely spent in the education sector, the pathway taken by Fran has similarities with that of Bob. Indeed as with Bob, and Alice in this instance, when asked about the influence of educational background on leadership practice, Fran feels that her attendance at a grammar school led her away from that sector into further education:

I've always been quite a strong advocate of comprehensive education. I mean grammar schools are fine for some people but it's quite elitist, when you work in FE which I see is the truly comprehensive sector; it's difficult to see that grammar schools are good places really for society.

As with the majority of the principals interviewed, Fran believes that her early education had little effect on her leadership but did push her away from elite education towards education for all. This "...understanding that some things can be socially divisive" had an impact on Fran "...in terms of a kind of a more left leaning perspective" which led her into a leadership role at teacher training college.

This leadership role was through the student union and helped Fran acquire certain leadership skills:

Education helps you by giving you tools, you practice debate, you practice a lot so it does give you an advantage and I wouldn't want to downplay that.

When questioned specifically about her internet survey response categorising herself as a transformational leader, Fran responded:

I try and transform – it's certainly the type of leadership I'm trying my best to achieve – I've had my 360 [degree appraisal] which is only a small proportion of the college but I'm getting some of that feedback. I'm not without things I need to work on and I'm sure they go into other types of leadership a little bit because that comes with it.

This self reflection indicates the difficulty for leaders to categorise themselves and the need for feedback from those they work with to assist in this process. Fran believes this type of leadership practice to be a "good way of leading" which she is eager to master although she has "...slightly autocratic tendencies". Having worked in an outstanding college in the past, Fran feels that "leading in a certain way" (a transformational way) is the best route to achieving this status for her college.

Educational background for Fran has had some impact with respect to her values and skills acquired. A bigger impact on her leadership practice appears to be her professional background.

Fran's career has been based in the education sector, both within and outside educational establishments. In a county-wide curriculum leadership role, Fran went out to FE colleges and promoted teamwork and developed her leadership practice:

I didn't see it at the time but actually it was a leadership role in some respects and I think that got me into management, it was a secondment and when I went back into my college I went back as a manager having left as a lecturer so that was the transition.

This led to various management roles in FE, including time as a union representative, which Fran felt increased her skill set, provided good quality training and gave her experience of different leadership styles that have influenced her currently perceived transformational approach. Fran believed that the union position “gave me confidence to have my own voice and to represent staff against management so that was again informative”.

A former college principal of Fran had sufficient impact on her as a role model which then led to her following him to a job in an education quango where her leadership style developed, in a similar fashion to that described by Chloe. Fran stated:

[It] was an interesting job, it made me more politically aware, with a small ‘p’, policy wise and also made me do more about building networks and building contacts and seeing the importance of that and also trying to influence people without being directly responsible for them.

This is reminiscent of the ‘Four Is’ of Bass and Avolio’s (1994) description of transformational leadership, especially idealised influence. Another ‘I’ evident in Fran’s responses is her belief, developed with the guidance of another former principal she worked under as a role model, that support for individuals to meet new goals and challenges, or individualised consideration.

The various roles in education have led to Fran’s appointment as an FE principal, for the first time, eighteen months prior to the interview. Fran believes that her on the job training, “I’ve taken part in both the aspiring principals training and now the new principals programme”, has been another influence on the way in which she leads as she has been told in this training “... that there are actually a set of skills, attributes or aspirational approaches if you like, which could usefully be shared or at least usefully reflected on”. However Fran does point out that her peers at other FE colleges within her county are very supportive and also influence her leadership practice:

Whilst the qualifying programme is very interesting and you make contact with principals in other areas, it’s having a peer group that you’re meeting once every half term is a real strength, as an almost

action learning set by default coming out of that grouping and I think that's good.

Other influences on leadership practice identified by Fran in the internet survey responses were college culture and policy environment.

The culture of the college is an area that Fran, in common with all but one of the principals interviewed, has attempted to change:

My predecessor had already tried to shift the culture from his predecessor which was what I would call a bullying culture, in some respects unmanaged as well so the culture lacked consistency, it lacked trust and that was beginning to shift, my job has been to take that and shift it quite a lot further and a lot quicker and we're not there yet.

The culture Fran is trying to achieve is based on values, which fits in with her self perception as a transformational leader which she feels can be achieved with a more "bottom up" approach emphasising her philosophy of transformation.

Policy environment is seen as being vital to the leadership undertaken by Fran as she has had to make tough decisions based on the "challenging environment" in which FE operates. She feels the key to dealing with this is good communication with staff as "getting it right is going to be quite crucial as it may affect people's jobs".

Fran's leadership practice, by her own admission and based on her responses presented in her interview, is in development. With only eighteen months experience in the role she, as with Chloe and Dan, is working towards her preferred approach to running an FE college by promoting her values and using the skills she has acquired in her professional career to date. It is clear that Fran has been influenced by others in education and that has led her to believe that the transformational leadership model is the most effective for her and her college.

## **Principal G (Graham)**

Graham described himself as a Type B leader in the internet survey, meaning that he believes a distributed approach to leadership is his most regularly practiced approach. However, Graham's practice does not appear to match his perception as indicated in the survey. When reminded of his self categorisation as a 'Type B' leader, Graham explained that he chose that response:

Because I think that's the way you are likely to get ... the most positive reactions, and therefore work commitment, interest, involvement that's the way you are likely to get the best out of the maximum number of people. That would be my simple way of expressing why I think that is the right approach.

He believes that the distributed approach motivates staff in the right way; it empowers them to do their job well. However, later in the interview he commented:

The approach that I expressed as my preferred approach I don't think is remotely an easy one and I know that if you asked a number of people in this college whether they recognised that approach and whether they felt as it were being successfully implemented there would be people who said no.

This comment highlights Graham's uncertainty in other people's understanding of his leadership, as does a further statement made in the interview:

...sort of knowing you want to do it that way and succeeding in making it happen is another ... I don't think I've achieved that so far in this college which is why some people say ... he's either not done that yet or he's not got there yet or whatever or it doesn't work for me or I don't recognise it or whatever.

It seems then that the preferred distributed approach is not being all that successful for Graham in terms of being recognised by others in his institution. Indeed, Graham feels that he is not leading in the way he would ideally like to lead:



I've had to tackle some difficult issues and I've had to go about that in some ways that I'm personally less than comfortable with, but the imperative of tackling the issues is that I've had to adopt to some extent a style and certainly had to take some decisions which I'm not exactly comfortable with but I found myself dealing with reality and having to address issues.

The leadership practice that Graham feels he has had to adopt to deal with these issues (such as policy environment and culture) could be described as closer to managerial than is evident in any of the other principals interviewed. This is apparent in comments such as:

... in the time I've been here, I've tended to focus a lot on the finances of the college and I'm trying to get us in a position where we are going to be secure for the future, as far as one ever can be, and they [college staff] are disappointed that I've not spent more time on the curriculum, on teaching and learning and on teaching staff and I think it's a fair criticism.

This is an illuminating insight into the issues that Graham is facing and the dilemma he has had in adopting a type of leadership that he is not comfortable with but feels is in the best interests of the college he leads. He explained on several occasions why he feels he has had to adapt his approach, an example of this being:

It's a case of which [option] does the least damage, which do we do best as an organisation with minimum damage to our students, etc. So I've had to push some things very strongly – I don't feel that we've had the time to engage in some of the consultation that people would have found desirable.

Thus indicating his desire for a brand of distribution of leadership (consultative) if the circumstances in which he finds the college had been different. In fact near the end of the interview Graham recognised the leadership he has been practicing:

I think what I've just been describing in this interview is a more managerial approach than would be my natural or preferred style... I

don't think I've fundamentally changed as a person or in my philosophy about how best to run a college but I'm operating differently reacting to circumstances.

So whilst recognising his current managerial approach to leadership, Graham perceives himself to ideally be a distributed leader if the circumstances were more in his favour. His indications are that he would favour the participative and democratic approach as described by Bush and Glover (2003) rather than Spillane's (2005) approach to distributed leadership practice.

When asked about the influence of his educational background on his leadership practice, Graham felt that his own education took him down the route of working in the education sector in the first instance:

...in terms of doing a degree and doing a teaching qualification it's very significant in having taken me into the profession in the first place and given me at various points a sense of direction.

The main influence that Graham believes his education has had on his leadership practice is through a very traditional academic education including a degree at a very traditional university. He felt that his academic discipline was not as influential as the skills he acquired whilst studying there:

It was essentially about teaching people critical, analytical thinking skills and it almost doesn't matter what subject that you are doing... I think [in studying my subject] there is a certain way of thinking and organising and seeing the world ... instinctively I suspect to a certain extent you come out with a different world view, a different set of values about how you approach things.

Graham continued to explain that these skills and values were difficult to pin down but he felt that they had led him to be in the position he is in today.

Graham felt that his professional background had had a much bigger impact than his education, not surprisingly given the much greater time working (over 30 years) rather than studying. As someone who had spent all his working life in education in a variety of roles both within and outside educational establishments, Graham highlighted a variety of experiences that had

influenced his preferred mode of leadership. These positions have included a government inspector, principal at another college and various other managerial roles. The skills acquired were described in quite general terms with comments such as:

I've seen a wide variety of things that work and I know I've seen some things that clearly regularly don't work and I've seen other things that do, I've seen bright ideas which are very different and that helps me to be able to talk to people with confidence about what I've seen or what I've directly experienced over time. And yes it influences the way I think, the way I work, the decisions I make, my sense of what is more likely to work, what is less likely to work all of those things which are not always going to be very conscious.

Whilst indicating that he has picked up leadership skills from his experience, Graham was not very forthcoming in explaining exactly what those skills and attributes are making it difficult to understand the way in which they have influenced his leadership.

The greater influence for Graham is that the "circumstances, and policy and environment can make a massive difference" to the way in which he leads his college. He believes these external factors have led to his adoption of the managerial approach he has practiced in the two years in post. He believes this is because they make a difference to "...what you see as your priorities as a leader and a manager and they will significantly influence what you can and can't do. So yes that makes a massive impact." He puts this change of circumstances largely down to a shortage of funds:

I really do think we went through a number of fat and relatively positive years and we're going through some very lean years now; and there are some issues there which are to do with this college and then there are other issues which are absolutely to do with government policy, changed financial climate and actually there are some issues I am addressing which my predecessor didn't need to address.

The overriding feeling from Graham is that the circumstances he finds his college to be in have led him to display a type of leadership which is

managerial that he is not totally comfortable with but feels is the only way to lead his college in the current climate, commenting that:

Your educational background, your professional background, I think they are absolutely relevant; what you are inherently like as a person, a personality, is relevant but then policy and environment, particular circumstances, they play a part.

Whilst these themes have emerged amongst the other interviewees it is with Graham that the burden seems to have been the greatest.

### **Principal H (Helen)**

Helen described herself as a Type B leader in the internet survey meaning that she believes a distributed approach to leadership is her most regularly practiced approach. Evidence of her understanding of what a distributed leadership approach consists of is presented in the way that she described her leadership practice:

I feel that we have a very positive team ethos here, a 'we can do' culture, it's like 'working with your family'. I wouldn't for one minute say that it's perfect; people are thinking at the moment that there are going to be redundancies and they're right but there is still a feeling that you don't get at other colleges – we're very much collegiate.

Thus emphasising the type of leadership that has been described as a "shared, social process" in the definitions of leadership used in the internet survey. The term collegiate is also one that has been used by some as a synonym to describe distributed leadership and appears to have been interpreted as such by Helen.

This emphasis on the importance of working as a whole college team is a recurring theme of Helen's perception of her approach to leadership:

You can get much more out of people if they feel that it is a nice place to work and they feel that they are part of a team.

She believes that there are ways of motivating staff as illustrated below:

The college pays at the top of the pay scales and tries to pay above the AoC guidelines. We also pay bonuses to staff when the surplus allows which is unusual for an FE college – this was £500 each last time.

There is a staff association and activities take place all the time, I really think that it's good for staff morale. There is a lot of competition within teams; to enhance that there are quiz teams, wii fit teams and this is encouraged.

Helen feels that this competition and belief in teams sets her college apart from others and means that everyone is pulling in the same direction. She feels that this needs to come from the top and spends time walking round the college challenging any bad student behaviour she sees and any dropping of litter to ensure that everyone takes pride in the environment in which they work and study. It could be argued that this way of leading, as a role model, indicates some aspects of transformational leadership where the leader inspires and motivates their staff. However, the elements of teamwork, staff development and co-operation throughout the organisation that Helen perceives are present in her college have resonance with the description of distributed leadership used in this study.

When questioned on the influence that professional background had had on her leadership practice, Helen pointed out that she had only spent one year outside education and the sole impact that had was to confirm that she did not want to work in industry.

The main influence her professional career had had on her approach to leadership was through undertaking some on the job training over twenty years ago. She explained that it was difficult to progress up the career ladder at that time in the further education sector:

As a female there wasn't just a glass ceiling, there was a bloody great ceiling which made it very difficult for women to make any progress in FE. Equal opportunities didn't operate as a woman and at the time it was difficult to get yourself heard.

Helen continued to say that:

At the time there was very much a 'male style' of leading where all the discussions were had in the pubs and gents and women didn't get a look in. There was no consideration of women's needs such as child care. It was not at all like it is today.

Helen took part in some training on how to approach leadership from a woman's point of view, she found out how females made it to being principal, how they coped, what sort of style they adopted. This, Helen added "... made it look like becoming principal would be possible. It made me feel that it was possible to be assertive about the woman's position and that one had to challenge the situation in hand". So it seems that the distributed style of leadership was borne out of approaching leadership in a more inclusive manner understood through on the job training.

Helen's early education played a part in a similar way to three other principals interviewed in this study. As was the case with Alice, Bob and Fran, Helen's experience of grammar school was not a particularly positive one and she completed her education at an FE college. She felt that the school route is not for everyone and that the FE sector enables people to have second chances like she did as there is not one particular way of studying like there is at a grammar school:

I thrived studying science A-levels because I engaged with really good teachers; that's the sort of experience I would like people to have at my college. There are lots of different ways of motivating people and it's important that everyone in the organisation buys into that idea.

In terms of the greatest influence on her career as principal Helen believed that to be completing her PhD. This was largely due to "... the methodical nature of a non-taught PhD and the requirement for discipline and self motivation which pushed me to become principal." It has also helped in enabling her to be competent at using data and so the skills picked up on the PhD have been very important to her career. She continued to say that "... many people in the organisation don't have these skills, it is not natural for them to present, read or interpret data." This acquisition of skills through study

is something that Helen feels put her at an advantage when making her way up the FE ladder.

When asked to describe the influence of other factors on her leadership practice, in common with all bar one of the other interviewees, Helen believed that culture was a factor. This echoed her valuing teamwork as key as she commented:

I'm not strong on the finance side of things so that is dealt with elsewhere in the team by one of the deputy principals. The whole team know what they are doing. There are no clear boundaries – there's a very corporate approach with one overall goal which is 'the college'. This is crucially important. The talent pool at the college is significant and it's important that there's a culture of people not watching their backs. It's much more about how the college can move forward to do better and it's vital that everyone has eyes in the front of their heads looking forward.

This description of culture concurs with previous comments on the distributed nature of Helen's leadership. She does feel, however, that the second factor impacting her leadership, economic environment has become "... more important" as she describes the current situation as "... a bloody awful time" and she feels one way of trying to deal with it is "... getting staff together to have a laugh". Helen recognises that:

For a number of years it has been growth-growth-growth and now there's a need to reduce staffing and I won't enjoy that – it's not something that's going to be a nice experience for any of us.

This has echoes of comments made by Graham who, unlike Helen, saw the need to change his leadership practice as a result. Helen's position is different to Graham's in that she has been principal of her college for nine years and had many long serving staff used to her standard approach to leadership which she feels allows it to be maintained despite the external pressures facing the college.

A summary of the principals' responses to the internet survey and interviews can be found in Table 4.5, highlighting the principals' perceptions of their leadership type, vocational grouping and the influences on their leadership:

**Table 4.5: Summary of principals' responses**

| Principal | Pseudonym | Reported Leadership Type (internet survey) | Vocational Grouping | Other Influences                       |
|-----------|-----------|--|---------------------|--|
| A         | Alice     | B  | Vocational -applied | Culture<br>Economic Environment        |
| B         | Bob       | A  | Soft-pure           | Culture<br>Policy Environment          |
| C         | Chloe     | A  | Soft-applied        | Culture<br>Strength of Management Team |
| D         | Dan       | A  | Vocational -applied | Culture<br>Community & Neighbourhood   |
| E         | Edward    | B  | Vocational -applied | Culture<br>Student Success             |
| F         | Fran      | A  | Soft-pure           | Culture<br>Policy Environment          |
| G         | Graham    | B  | Soft-pure           | Policy Environment<br>Funding          |
| H         | Helen     | B  | Hard-applied        | Culture<br>Economic Environment        |



## Chapter 5

### Discussion of findings

The definitions used to describe the three types of leadership practice to which the respondents self categorised have been used as a heuristic device. The device was used to speed up the process of leaders defining their perceived preferred leadership practice as an exhaustive list of leadership definitions would seem to be unworkable. The approaches to leadership practice as described by types A, B and C give a choice to participating principals of three styles of leadership they perceive they most frequently practice. Their response then acted as a signal rather than a definitive reflection of the way in which they lead their college. This learning tool gives the researcher an idea of the way in which principals believe they lead which has been explored further in the eight case studies interviewed.

The purpose of this research is to build on the earlier work of others and to investigate any developments in this area seeking significant and original findings that have emerged in this seldom researched educational sector.

Lumby and Tomlinson's (2000) study into managerialism and leadership in further education interviewed eight FE college principals and recognised that their research "...reflects self-reported views, but the debate to date has centred on the perceptions of all involved in further education" (p.140) indicating that this is the way in which research in this area has often been carried out. These researchers felt justified in their methodology, as do I, as "...the perceptions of a group of eight principals, their values, beliefs and practice, is a valid contribution to challenging the hegemony of managerialism" (Lumby and Tomlinson, 2000, p.140). Where this thesis differs is in my use of a mixed method approach by first gathering information from a larger number of principals regarding their backgrounds and perceived leadership practice. This use of internet survey and interview has allowed a wider snapshot of current principals' backgrounds to be reported. The eight principals in Lumby and Tomlinson's study had all come from professional backgrounds within the education sector with each of them having had experience outside the FE sector. In a study into women leaders in further education, Stott and Lawson (1997) found that only seven of the forty eight respondents they researched

had spent their entire career in further education with twenty one of them starting their careers teaching in schools. This differs from my research as six of the eight participants had only experience gained in the FE sector and just one had experience gained in other areas of education. Only one of the principals in my research has any significant professional experience outside education which is perhaps surprising given the vocational nature of the work carried out in further education establishments. Indeed, the period of time spent working outside the education sector amongst the 39 respondents to the internet survey could be considered limited given the vocational nature of further education. Less than one-third of respondents had more than two years experience outside education. Amongst this group the lack of industry experience appears not to have been a barrier to their progress to the top of their organisations. The one principal interviewed with significant experience outside the education sector, Chloe, progressed quickly when she made the move into education solely in a non-teaching capacity. This non-teaching route is perhaps less prevalent than could have been expected in the further education sector as discussed previously in this chapter.

Another noteworthy difference between the participants in Lumby and Tomlinson's (2000) research and that carried out in this study is in relation to their educational background. While Lumby and Tomlinson (2000) reported the "failed education" of three of their interviewees, a significant proportion, six out of eight, of the principals in my research attended grammar school and over half (51.2%) of respondents to the internet survey had done so. The two interviewees who did not attend grammar school went to private school. This group of eight principals therefore all have personal experience of a selective education but have become leaders of institutions where access is open to all.

It is clear that, when asked about the influence of their early education, this group of principals have not been drawn towards leading in the selective education system that they experienced and in some cases believe that non-selective education is a more attractive proposition for a wider group of people in society.

It was suggested in the literature review that principals from different vocational groupings may practice leadership differently as described in the methodology

chapter. There seemed to be some merit in this suggestion based on the findings from the internet survey and the perception of the principals interviewed points towards some confirmation of the conjecture I put forward in the literature review.

The research carried out by Becher in 1989 and 2001, as described in the literature review chapter, focused on the nature of disciplines in higher education and the way in which staff work and how they communicate with others in the HE community. Whilst not strictly relating to leadership, and not designed specifically with further education in mind, there are areas of the research that I have adapted and taken into account for this thesis with particular reference to the influence of educational background on leadership practice.

It was suggested in the literature review that categorising disciplines into groups in this way to investigate leadership practice was not Becher's intention, but could be a useful approach for the design of research in this thesis. The question was whether the discipline from which the FE leaders originate has had an effect on the leadership practice they display. I hoped to be able to find if a relationship was indicated between vocational/disciplinary grouping and the leadership practice that is displayed by the FE principals. It was suggested that this may prove to be problematic as I am relying on the principals' perceptions of their leadership practice but also that it was worth consideration.

In the cohort of eight principals interviewed, those who most strongly believed that their academic discipline had some influence on their leadership practice were Bob, Dan and Edward. Bob believed that his studies gave him the necessary skills to lead an organisation; Dan felt that his academic discipline helped to form his values and beliefs as an educator in an open access sector such as further education and Edward stated that his background gave him the focus on teamwork important to his perceived leadership approach.

Despite the warning from Becher and Trowler (2001) that "... it becomes quite perilous to make generalizing statements about practices among academics in a particular specialism" (p.xiv) and that "... the 'special' significance of disciplinary knowledge has been diminished" (p.xiv) they add that "It has not

disappeared though; it remains a significant factor to be taken into account in attempting to understand the academic profession” (p.xiv) and so is worth considering when addressing the issue of leadership practice in this thesis.

Of the three principals highlighted above, Bob perceived himself to be a transformational leader from a soft-pure background, Dan a transformational leader from a ‘vocational-applied’ background and Edward a distributed leader from a ‘vocational-applied’ background. Bob’s perception of his leadership concurs with my suggestion that principals falling into the ‘soft-pure’ grouping are most likely to practice transformational leadership as Becher suggests the culture in such groups will be person-oriented and loosely structured. Dan and Edward’s perceptions concur with my suggestion that those principals who come from a background that I have described as ‘vocational-applied’ may display a range of leadership practices as there is great variation in the disciplines falling in to this classification. It is not an exact science by any means but has some reason.

The other five principals did not suggest in their responses that their vocational grouping have had a major influence on their leadership practice.

In terms of the study of leadership style, Lumby and Tomlinson’s (2000) focus was on providing evidence to confirm or dispel the existence of managerial leadership. In contrast, the research for this thesis has been designed to provide an understanding of the influences on the leadership practice of college principals based on their perceptions. Some similarities in the findings are apparent. Lumby and Tomlinson (2000) found that “Principals C, F, G, H delegated more and also placed emphasis on reaching a consensus” (p.145) which they felt “... does not match the controlling paradigm as presented in the managerialist critique” (p.145). This echoes the perceived approach undertaken by principals as reported in this thesis, particularly Alice, Edward, Graham and Helen. Where this thesis differs from Lumby and Tomlinson’s (2000) is in the focus on the influence of background and other factors on leadership practice rather than being on the attempt to confirm or dispel the existence of managerialism. Whilst there is a resemblance between the method of data collection through interview, and some of the data collected

has concurrence, the research carried out for this thesis is an attempt to update the data and provide a focus on leadership influencers.

Sala (2003) undertook a quantitative study of UK College principals exploring their perceptions of leadership. One area of contradiction with this thesis is in relation to length of time in position and the influence on leadership style. Sala (2003) found that "...older principals [with more years' experience] are perceived by others and themselves to exhibit fewer positive leadership styles" (p.185), with Sala indicating that this less positive leadership style being a managerial approach. This was not the case indicated by the group completing the internet survey where the three respondents who perceived their leadership practice to be Type C (managerial) had been in post for three years or fewer. However, the three principals interviewed in this thesis who indicated from their responses that they may display managerial characteristics were all what Sala would describe as "older principals" and so indicate some agreement with Sala's suggestions. Sala (2003) also found that "... background and demographic characteristics (aside from years of experience and age) are not associated with principals' managerial style" (p.185). This finding is in contrast to the data collected for this study where the association between background and leadership practice is the focus and findings are presented to show that some influence of these may exist. Whilst Sala's (2003) research had a different methodological approach and the presentation of data differed, the research did investigate the influences on leadership. An area where this research and Sala's converges is on the perceived importance of organisational culture on effective leadership. Sala found that leadership style can influence college culture leading to improve the quality of education provided which is much the same opinion of seven of the eight principals interviewed in this thesis.

Muijs et al (2006) recognised that there had been "... little research on transformational leadership and its impact" (p.88) in the post-compulsory education sector thereby indicating the need for research of the type undertaken in this thesis. Muijs et al (2006) put forward the idea that "... the charismatic element in the traditional definitions of transformational leadership [is] hard to engender if not present in the personality of the leader" (p.99) and that "The question of fit between leader and organizational culture is a complex

one” (p.100). This belief that both a leader’s personality and the culture of their college had an effect on the success of undertaking leadership with a transformational approach has some resonance with the research carried out in this thesis. All four of the principals interviewed, who described themselves as transformational leaders, believed that culture is the most impactful factor (other than professional and educational background) on their leadership.

The concept of culture is well researched in general terms, but there is a deficit of research into the relationship between culture and leadership in the further education sector. A basic definition with relevance to this research is that culture is “The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization or group” (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952, p.223). This study focuses on the influence that the participants in the interviews feel the culture of their college has had on the way in which they lead or in some cases the way they have led their college in an attempt to change the culture of the institution. The principals had differing ideas of what the college culture meant to them and how it had any influence on their leadership.

As principals in FE colleges arguably hold the greatest power of any members of the college community, their understanding of culture is particularly vital to the success of their institution (Lumby and Foskett, 2011). Five of the interviewees referred to their attempts to change the culture of the organisation to suit their preferred leadership practice. This ‘reculturing’ as described by Fullan (2001) is a great challenge for leaders as indicated by principals such as Alice, Chloe, Edward, Fran and Graham who have all described their attempts to put their mark on the organisations they lead. DiPaola (2003) highlighted the problematic nature of the culture change process by stating that “creating this culture of change by constantly challenging the status quo is a contact sport involving hard, labor-intensive work and a lot of time” (p.153).

The principals seeking a change in culture in their organisation approached the change from different perspectives. Alice, Chloe and Edward expressed their desire for all staff in the organisation to take more responsibility. This echoes the overall change in the culture of FE colleges, as described by Elliott and Hall (1994), when the changes to government policies on funding and accountability created anxiety in the sector.

Despite the differing reflections of culture by researchers and the participants in this study alike, one reason for the emphasis on culture as a factor influencing these principals' leadership could be the standing of their institutions. None of the eight principals interviewed lead 'outstanding' colleges (as graded by Ofsted) and as Lumby (2003) states "Success breeds stability. Threat leads to culture change" (p.170). So it could be that striving to improve the reputation of the college is the driver of cultural change as well as the way in which these principals practice their leadership. A word of warning comes from Lumby and Foskett (2011) as they state that there are "... potential benefits of education leaders' engagement with culture" (p.14), but there are also "... multiple and serious risks" (p.14) given the superficial approaches that can be used in attempting to measure an establishment's culture.

Muijs et al's (2006) description of "shared transformational leadership" has some resonance with participants in this thesis, particularly Chloe, as described above; and the leadership described as evident in the study by Muijs et al (2006) as distributed – "... readily associated with the distribution of responsibilities rather than power... viewed as largely a mechanism for delivering organisational imperatives" (p.92) is apparent in the way in which Alice perceives that she leads.

Muijs et al (2006) focussed on three types of leadership in a similar manner to this thesis and found that leaders' most favoured perceived style was transformational and least favoured distributed. Gleeson and Knights (2008) commented similarly that "increasingly, the art of leadership has become associated with transformational rather than transactional processes" (p.55). This differed slightly from the results of both the internet survey and interviews in this thesis. Both methods showed that half of the respondents perceived their leadership as transformational concurring with Muijs et al's (2006) findings but a larger proportion (42.1% of survey respondents; 50% of interviewees) categorised themselves as distributed leaders. Whilst different studies taking place at different times with different cohorts and relatively small numbers do not allow definitive conclusions to be drawn, this does indicate a possible movement in popularity towards a distributed approach. As has been previously stated, however, principals' definitions of distributed leadership can hint at consultation and delegation rather than distribution.

The starting point for defining leadership practice in a useable form using the heuristic device of asking principals to identify their preferred style of three was Bush and Glover (2003). More recent work by Bush (2008) confirms the assertion stated above that distributed leadership is becoming a more popular practice as it “stresses people and networks rather than lone chiefs” (p.276) which is a position taken by principals such as Edward who wanted to get his college away from the “... idea of leaders as heroes” to a position where everyone worked together. However, half of the respondents to the survey and half of the principals interviewed perceived their leadership to be transformational not indicating a wholesale shift towards distributed leadership in this cohort.

Bush (2008) recognises the linking of leadership with values as discussed in sections of this thesis but understands the difficulty in measuring values arguing that “leaders are free to pursue their own values only if they are consistent with those of central government” (Bush, 2008, p.278). This view on values has been explored to an extent in this thesis as principals have stated their values and how they have struggled to assert these to influence their college’s culture through their leadership practice. Bush (2008) argues that it is important for principals to assert their values when leading as “... value-free policy implementation can be regarded as managerial” (p.275) echoing the practice Graham perceived he practiced having expressed no clear description of his set of values.

More recent research by Gronn (2009) argues that a new practice of leadership has emerged which he has called “hybrid” leadership. This has similarities with Muijs et al’s (2006) “shared transformational” leadership in that it indicates the difficulty of categorising educational leaders as running their organisation with one sole leadership approach, a mixed or hybrid configuration of leadership describes principals’ practice more effectively. Based on the group of principals interviewed in this thesis, there is the possibility of a mixed or hybrid approach to leadership where professional and educational background and other college and external factors appear to indicate that clearly defining a leader as being one of the three types identified is problematic.



With specific reference to the professional backgrounds of the leaders interviewed in this thesis and their long serving careers in the FE sector, a word of caution is present in the research of Gleeson and Knights (2008). They comment that middle managers in FE are “not continually seeking promotion especially when it involves a threat to their pedagogic values, work-life balance, or defeminisation” (p.66) and that “growing their own” (p.66), (providing leaders from within FE who rise up through the ranks) cannot be relied on in the future. If this is to be the case and is a current trend, it appears that the cohort used in my thesis is a dying breed.

The data collected from both the internet survey and interviews in this study has allowed a more up to date picture to emerge from that presented in the literature of Stott and Lawson (1997); Lumby and Tomlinson (2000); Sala (2003); Bush and Glover (2003); Muijs et al (2006); Gleeson and Knights (2008); Bush (2008); Gronn (2009). This thesis has taken some of the areas of research such as developing the descriptions of leadership practice and adapted them to investigate the influences on those practices. This new focus has confirmed the perceived existence of perceptions of both transformational and distributed leadership practice amongst the eight principals interviewed whilst delving into the reasons behind the particular approach to leadership.



## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

The findings discussed in the preceding chapter indicate that the data collected in this study has presented some unexpected results. This chapter reviews the findings in relation to the initial research aims before discussing the findings that emerged from the data which were unexpected at the start of the study. There follows a review of the research methodology taking into account these unexpected findings, concluding with a discussion of the implications for future research in this area of educational leadership.

The data collected in this mixed method study was designed to firstly give a snapshot of the backgrounds from which FE leaders come and the leadership they practice and ascertain any patterns that emerge regarding possible links between leadership practice and principal's background. Secondly, the interviews were designed to gather a more detailed set of data to further investigate influences on leadership practice and to explore any patterns emerging from the data.

The principals that participated in the interview stage of the research process were chosen by convenience sample as the eight survey respondents who agreed to contribute further and so were not designed to be a representative sample of the FE principal population as a whole.

#### **6.1 Findings against research aims**

This section revisits the research aims of the study, discussing the extent to which each aim was achieved.

##### **6.1.1 Research Aim 1: Investigate the educational backgrounds of FE leaders**

On the subject of the influence of educational background, all participants in the interview process felt that their early education at school had had little or no impact on their leadership. It was interesting to note that all of the six interviewees who attended grammar school felt that the only effect it had was to drive them towards a career in a more comprehensive type of education i.e. FE, as they saw grammar schools as elitist and not offering opportunities for all

of society. The interviewees represented a similar proportion of grammar school attendees as the internet survey (62.5% as opposed to 51.2% of respondents).

Education at university had more influence on leadership as participants became involved in activities where skills were acquired and values confirmed. The academic discipline studied also shaped the way that the participants viewed the world and gathered the necessary skills to form their favoured style of leadership. Postgraduate education had a particular impact on one principal, Helen, who felt that completing a doctorate to have had the greatest impact of all in giving her the skills and attributes to become a distributed leader.

### **6.1.2 Research Aim 2: Investigate the professional backgrounds of FE leaders**

It appears that professional background has had a greater influence on leadership practice than educational background. Seven of the eight principals interviewed had experienced careers solely in education, six of whom had been exclusively or almost exclusively within the FE sector. This statistic is not representative of the careers of the respondents to the internet survey and it is certainly not likely to be representative of the FE principal community in its entirety but does help to contextualise the nature of the principals involved in this study. When compared to previous studies regarding the leadership of FE principals, this sample represents a greater bias towards career further education practitioners. In their study into managerialism and leadership in further education Lumby and Tomlinson (2000) interviewed eight principals of whom five had been schoolteachers, one had worked in higher education and two had worked in adult education. The sample used in this study present a picture based on greater FE experience along with a much lower prevalence of self-reported managerialism than Lumby and Tomlinson's study indicated.

Participants felt that much of what they had learnt in their careers about leadership was as a result of observing what worked and what did not work for other leaders with whom they had worked. Others believed that their careers had given them experiences which allowed leadership skills to develop and

undertaken training which gave them an understanding of how to lead effectively.

While skills were seen as being important by all the interviewees, many referred to their values and the values of the college they lead as also being important. These values were again acquired through experience in their education, profession and through their family life.

### **6.1.3 Research Aim 3: Explore the leadership practice of FE leaders**

The leadership practices most commonly reported in this study were transformational and distributed. This does not resonate with some of the previous research in the further education sector which suggests that managerial leadership is most prevalent in senior leaders (Sawbridge, 2000; Lumby and Tomlinson, 2000; Govindji and Linley, 2008; Dixon et al, 2010 and Lambert, 2011), but does concur with studies suggesting that transformational leadership is an attractive proposition in which leaders wish to categorise themselves (Lumby, 2005; Muijs et al, 2006) and that distributed leadership is supported by senior leaders in colleges (Lumby, 2003) and is a seductive idea (Woods, 2004). There are limitations of research using a self-reporting methodology which have been discussed in section 3.3 of this thesis.

### **6.1.4 Research Aim 4: Analyse the relationship between FE leaders' backgrounds and their leadership practice**

It would be unwise to generalise from the findings of the research given the nature of the study but it is clear from those interviewed that background has had an influence on the leadership they practice. In the case of education this is evident through the impact of subjects studied, courses undertaken, institutions attended. In terms of the influence of professional background the impact is evident through the job roles practiced, the colleagues and line managers with whom they have worked and the circumstances experienced.

The research aims have been addressed in that both professional and educational backgrounds have been investigated; the perceived leadership practices of the 39 principals who participated in the internet survey have been sought and explored in the case of the eight interviewed. The fourth aim has

been addressed through the investigation of any relationship that may exist between principals' backgrounds and the way in which they lead their colleges.

The purpose of the study was to ascertain any influence of professional and educational background on the leadership practice of FE college principals.

The results in relation to the four stated research aims, indicate the main contributing factors to the principals' approach to leadership to be their skill set, values and beliefs attained to an extent through their background.

## **6.2 Emergent findings**

The research has found issues that were not fully expected at the outset of the thesis with the influence of factors other than educational and professional background appearing to be of greater influence than these initially sought factors.

For instance, 53.8% of internet survey responses indicated that the participants felt college culture was the most impactful factor on their leadership and seven of the eight principals interviewed saw college culture as being of great influence. It is difficult to know why this is the case, perhaps those who see culture as being important were more likely to want to discuss it further in the interview stage.

When discussing college culture, five of the seven principals (Alice, Chloe, Dan, Edward and Fran) indicated in their responses that they were eager to change the culture of their college to fit their preferred leadership practice. For both Alice and Edward this had been a project of many years duration, Chloe, Dan and Fran had been attempting to make this change over a period of 18 months or fewer. Muijs (2011) argues that "The question of fit between leader and organisational culture is a complex one. In traditional narratives around transformational leadership, the prevailing view is one of the leader moulding and changing organisational culture" (p.49) so it would seem that for Chloe, Fran and Dan there is the possibility that they will be successful in changing their college's culture as they all see themselves as transformational leaders. Alice and Edward, on the other hand, perceive they are distributed leaders and run large FE colleges which may make it less likely that they will succeed in

changing the culture of their college to meet their college's requirements and leadership needs.

The research indicates that, for the cohort of eight principals interviewed, there is a level of discord between principals' ambitions regarding their leadership and their practice influenced by the imperatives of their environment. The extent to which the factors described as mediated or indirect factors in figure 3.2 have had an effect on leadership practice appears to be greater than initially suggested. As discussed in this and other chapters of this research, these factors include culture, funding and government policy.

The emergent results highlight the problematic nature of the leadership concepts used in this study when leaders are bound by the standards and practice of an institution and government education policies and may find it difficult to put their individual stamp on the college. What is clear is that principals find leading a challenge which all participants appear to enjoy.

### **6.3 Review of research methodology**

The research methodology, as outlined in chapter three, suggested that a post-positivist approach was felt to be the most appropriate for this study. This decision was based on the belief that principals' perceptions of their leadership practice are difficult for the participants to categorise. The approach also recognises that it is problematic to disentangle values and facts (Carlsson, 2003). The decision to utilise this ontological position led the study towards a mixed method approach in an attempt to increase reliability and validity, as discussed in sections 3.4.1 and 3.4.2.

As highlighted elsewhere in this thesis, the internet survey was designed to gather basic data targeting as many FE college principals as possible. The survey was deliberately simple in design to ensure that completion was not too onerous or time consuming for these very busy and time constrained senior educational leaders. The most troublesome area to address in compiling the survey was distilling the myriad of leadership styles down to a manageable number and then refining these three into bite-size definitions. The simple design meant that an in depth understanding of the leadership practice and the influences on respondents' leadership was not possible. However, this was

never the purpose of the survey; it was always designed to be one of two methods of collecting data and fulfilled its remit in that it allowed broad brush data to be gathered from a wider range of principals than it would have been possible to interview.

Having carried out the research it appears that the contingency model of leadership practice is one that would have been useful to consider adopting in the typology. The influence of context on leadership practice appears to be greater than initially suggested in the development of the survey. If this influence was known at the start of this research journey contingent leadership would have been included as a type of leadership to include as an option to choose. Four types of leadership practice would have not greatly prolonged the survey but would have allowed the principals the opportunity to state the impact of their situation on their leadership which now appears from the interviews to be important.

The survey response rate meant that statistical analysis was not possible and gave more weighting and import to the interview stage of the process. Both methods of research relied to an extent on the self-reporting of principals' approaches to leadership which has its flaws, or as stated by Howard (1994) "... the contaminations of ...social desirability and selective memory" (p.399). There was an attempt to tackle these flaws in the interviews by delving deeper into the responses in an attempt to understand the actual leadership practiced as described by the principals' examples of their approaches to leading their institutions. This is where contingent leadership appeared to be in evidence.

The interviews were more successful in understanding the influences on leadership than the internet survey, which was to be expected given the length of time spent in this element of the research process.

#### **6.4 Implications for future research**

This study has been designed to investigate the influences on the leadership practiced by further education college principals. The findings contribute to our knowledge of the FE sector in two ways. Firstly, the survey data offers an insight into the backgrounds from which current FE principals come and the leadership they practice. The data, collected from the responses of 39 FE



college principals and chief executives, provides a snapshot of the range of backgrounds from which FE leaders emerge and their self reported leadership practice. Secondly, the interview study provides more detailed evidence of the way in which both professional and educational background in addition to other factors have influenced the leadership practice of principals representing eight further education colleges across England.

The influence of factors other than principals' backgrounds has also been considered with the greatest impact appearing to be college culture. This is a highly complex and heavily researched area which has been tackled in this study to an extent but may be worth further investigation in future research.

The findings suggest that the way that individual principals cope with these external factors is determined by their confidence in their leadership and the culture of their establishment. This confidence is partly influenced by the background from which they come and the length of time in the position of leader.

Further research would be beneficial to explore leadership in the FE sector. Firstly, the study has suggested that the mission drift of education may have led to a change in the background of FE principals – further, in depth research could determine if this is a general trend by interviewing a greater number of principals. Secondly, further research could be carried out to investigate the influence of culture on FE leadership, which has been discussed as an important factor by many of the principals involved in this study.

Further education continues to be an under researched sector that would benefit from a more thorough examination as budgets are squeezed and effective leadership becomes ever more essential in this ever changing and vital sector of the UK education system.

There have been no attempts in this analysis to make generalisations about FE leaders given both the complexity of human behaviour and the range of environments in which these leaders operate. However, the study has allowed a snapshot of the influences on leadership in an under researched sector where few studies have ventured and managerial leadership has been the

dominant conceptual framework (Randle and Brady, 1997; Gleeson and Shain, 1999; Lumby and Tomlinson, 2000).

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## **Appendices**

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## **Appendix A - National Qualifications Framework (NQF)**

The National Qualification Framework (NQF) sets out the levels at which qualifications can be recognised. There are nine levels (entry level to level 8) in the NQF.

**NQF Entry Level qualifications:** Entry Level Certificate.

**NQF Level 1 qualifications:** GCSE grades D-G; Foundation Diploma; BTEC Introductory Diploma and Certificate; NVQ Level 1.

**NQF Level 2 qualifications:** GCSE grades A\*-C; Higher Diploma; Intermediate GNVQ; NVQ Level 2; BTEC First Diploma and Certificate; and Key Skills Level 2.

**NQF Level 3 qualifications:** A-level; Advanced Diploma and Progression Diploma, AVCE; BTEC National Diploma, Certificate and Award; BTEC Diploma in Foundation Studies (Art and Design); Advanced GNVQ; Access to Higher Education Diploma at Level 3; and NVQ Level 3. Other Level 3 equivalent qualifications include Welsh Baccalaureate, Scottish Highers, Irish Leaving Certificates and the International Baccalaureate.

**NQF Level 4 qualifications:** Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE).

**NQF Level 5 qualifications:** Foundation Degree (e.g. FdA, FdSc); BTEC Higher National Diploma (HND) and Certificate (HNC); Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE).

**NQF Level 6 qualifications:** Bachelor degrees (e.g. BA, BSc, LLB); Graduate Certificates (GradCert) and Diplomas (GradDip).

**NQF Level 7 qualifications:** Masters degrees (e.g. MA, MSc, MPhil); Postgraduate Certificates (PgCert) and Diplomas (PgDip).

**NQF Level 8 qualifications:** Doctorate (e.g. PhD).

## **APPENDIX B – Internet Survey**

### **Introductory Page**

#### Survey of Further Education Principals

Leadership practice in the Further Education sector is a rarely researched area. My thesis seeks to investigate any perceived link between the educational and professional backgrounds of Principals and their leadership practice.

This survey and subsequent qualitative research aims to give an insight into this field.

If you would like a summary of the findings of this research, please enter your e-mail address in the final section of the survey. The summary will consist of data such as the range of qualifications held by Further Education Principals, their professional backgrounds and their perception of leadership practice.

If you would be willing to be contacted further to discuss leadership in Further Education, please enter your name and telephone number in the final section of the survey. This will consist of an interview for up to 40 minutes or so within the next six weeks.

---

☐ Please tick (check) this box to indicate that you consent to taking part in this survey

[Click here to start this survey](#)

---

## Section 1 – Professional Background

Please select your gender:

- Female
- Male

Please select your age range:

- Under 35 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- 55-60 years old
- 61 years or older

Current position held:

- Principal
- Chief Executive
- Principal and Chief Executive
- Managing Director
- Other – please state below

If you answered “Other” in the previous question, please state job title below:

.....

Length of time in current position (in years and months):

.....

Title of post held previous to your current post:

- Deputy/Vice Principal
- Head of Faculty or curriculum area
- Head of Department
- Lecturer
- Headteacher
- Other – please state below
- None

If you answered “Other” in the previous question, please state job title below:

.....

Length of time in last position (in years and months):

.....

Total length of time working in education (including posts held outside Further Education):

- Less than 2 years
- 2-8 years
- 9-15 years
- 16-22 years
- 23-29 years
- 30 years or more

What is your main academic discipline?

.....

....

What was the last post you held outside education (and in what industry)?

.....

....

.....

....

Total length of time working outside education:

- Less than 2 years
- 2-8 years
- 9-15 years
- 16-22 years
- 23-29 years
- 30 years or more

## Section 2 – Educational Background

Which of the following best describes the type of school/college you attended between the ages of 12 and 18 years? (please tick more than one box if appropriate):

- Secondary Modern School
- Comprehensive School
- Private School
- Home School
- Independent School
- Grammar School
- Further Education College
- Sixth Form College

Which, if any, of the following Higher Education institutions did you attend? (please tick more than one box if appropriate):

- University
- Polytechnic
- Teacher Training College
- Higher Education College
- Other
- None

Please indicate the level of the highest qualification you have achieved:

- Level 8 - Doctorate
- Level 7 – Masters Degree
- Level 6 – Bachelor Degree, Graduate Certificate and Diploma
- Level 5 – Diploma of Higher Education and Further Education, Foundation Degrees and HNDs
- Level 4 – Certificate of Higher Education
- Level 3 – A Levels, BTEC National, NVQ3

### Section 3 – Leadership

Three definitions of leadership practice are displayed below. Please indicate which **one** describes the leadership approach you spend the most time practicing:

- Type A – I am a leader who inspires, motivates and encourages a culture of questioning and intellectual stimulation.
- Type B – I am a leader who undertakes leadership that is a shared, social process.
- Type C – I am a leader whose focus is on financial sustainability to underpin the quality of the learning experience to achieve organisational goals.

Which of the following factors has the most impact on the way in which you lead your college?

- College culture
- College governance
- Policy environment
- Economic environment
- Funding
- Community and neighbourhood
- Other – please state below

If you answered “Other” in the previous question, please state the “other” factor here:

.....

Please choose the factor that has the second biggest impact on the way in which you lead your college:

- College culture
- College governance
- Policy environment
- Economic environment
- Funding

- Community and neighbourhood
- Other – please state below

If you answered “Other” in the previous question, please state the “other” factor here:

.....

#### **Section 4 – Further Research**

If you would like a summary of the findings of this research, please enter your e-mail address below:

.....

.....

If you would be willing to be contacted further to discuss leadership in Further Education, please enter your name and telephone number below:

.....

.....



## **Final Page**

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. It is much appreciated and will hopefully lead to useful information about leadership practice in the Further Education Sector.

If you would like a summary of the findings of this research and did not enter your e-mail address in the final section of the survey please e-mail [S.R.Finch@soton.ac.uk](mailto:S.R.Finch@soton.ac.uk)

If you would be willing to be contacted further to discuss leadership in Further Education and did not enter your name and telephone number in the final section of the survey please e-mail [S.R.Finch@soton.ac.uk](mailto:S.R.Finch@soton.ac.uk). This will consist of an interview for up to 40 minutes or so within the next six weeks.

---

## **APPENDIX C – Semi-Structured Interviews**

### *Question Schedule*

1. How would you describe your educational background?
2. Do you think that your educational background has had any impact on:
  - (a) The way in which you have approached your career?
  - (b) The way in which you lead your college?If so, how is this evident? If not, why not?
3. How would you describe your professional background?
4. Do you think that your professional background has had any impact on:
  - (c) The way in which you have approached your career?
  - (d) The way in which you lead your college?If so, how is this evident? If not, why not?
5. Are there any other factors that you feel have had a significant impact on the way in which you lead your college? What are they? (Refer to list on survey)

## **Additional Questions posed during interviews**

### *Educational Background*

Do you think the way in which you lead has been influenced at all by your educational background?

Do you think that the way in which you were educated, going to a grammar school, then university did that have influence on your willingness or desire to become a leader?

I was wondering if you felt that your academic discipline had had any effect on the way you lead, do you have a view on any link?

In terms of going to grammar school did that have any effect in you wanting to become a leader at all?

So the fact that your school changed from a grammar school to comprehensive do you think that had an effect on you wanting to work in FE?

### *Professional Background*

So you've picked up good and bad points in the way in which you lead?

So do you think you have changed the way in which you have led over the years as a result of that?

So it is more to do with the job or more to do with you?

In terms of your professional background do you feel that working in a variety of different roles has had any influence in the way in which you have led or has your leadership style changed at all over the years depending on various things?

Have you seen the direct influence of your leadership or management on the rest of the college from the places you've been to?

Bearing in mind that you've had a past career before education, has that influenced at all the way in which you've gone about leading your college?

So in terms of your professional background, you picked up different things along the way working for different people, your ethos is very strong in terms of the way in which you lead?

### *Leadership practice*

On your questionnaire when I suggested three different types of leadership and which one fit you best you put the one about being a shared social process – so I guess that's to do with being confident with your team?

In your questionnaire you put yourself down as Type A - a leader who inspires, motivates and encourages a culture of questioning and intellectual stimulation – is this the type of leadership that is evident in you all the time - something that you think people would recognise?

Do you think your leadership has changed at all over the years?

So do you think you've picked up various leadership techniques from the various people you've worked for?

Is that type of leadership something that comes naturally to you or is it something you've seen works elsewhere by role models – you thought ok that's a good way of leading?

### *Other impacts*

The other aspect I was looking at with regards to influence on your leadership was college culture – how do you feel that influences the way in which you lead?

The other factor that you put in terms of leadership was student success so that is the thing you obviously want to be achieved as a result?

I guess they'll always be resistance to change? Especially if people have been used to something else for quite a while?

I think even when I was writing this questionnaire it was before the big announcements about cuts so your answers now would have been different to what they may have been potentially a few months ago. And funding again you

put as your second biggest impact, whereas maybe this time last year you may not have said that?

I also asked about the other factors you thought were important and you put college culture – do you think you've changed the college culture over the years you've been principal?

And you're comfortable you can still do that given what's happening at the moment with next year and funding issues?

Do you feel the culture when you came here is something you want to try and change a little bit?

The second biggest impact out of the list I suggested was policy environment - do you think that's changing the way in which you lead?

Are there any other factors you think have had a big impact on the way in which you currently lead the college?

## **Appendix D - Email to FE Principals**

Dear Principal/Chief Executive,

I am a lecturer in a Further Education College studying for a Doctorate in Education on a part-time basis. My thesis seeks to investigate any perceived link between the educational and professional backgrounds of Principals and their leadership practice.

The initial research consists of a short internet survey which should take around 5 minutes to complete.

It would be very much appreciated if you could assist me in my research by participating in this survey.

The link to the survey is:

<http://www.isurvey.soton.ac.uk/1286>

Once completed, I have offered you the option to request a summary of my findings by entering your e-mail address in the final section of the survey. The summary will consist of data such as the range of qualifications held by Further Education Principals, their professional backgrounds and their perception of leadership practice.

I am also planning to conduct further research. This will consist of an interview for up to 40 minutes or so within the next six weeks which would allow a more in depth study to take place and give you the chance to enhance the detail of my research in this under represented sector. There is the opportunity to register an interest in participating in this part of the research in the final section of the survey.

Many thanks for taking the time to read this e-mail and I hope you are able to complete the internet survey.

Kind Regards,  
Stephen Finch.

## **Appendix E – Ethics Documentation**

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## **Participant Information Sheet**

### **Study Title:**

The influence of background and demographic factors on the leadership of further education principals

### **Researcher:**

Stephen Finch

### **Ethics number:**

**Please read this information carefully before deciding to take part in this research. If you are happy to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form.**

What is the research about?

*The research aims to identify any perceived links between the educational and professional background of FE College Principals and their leadership practice. This is a student project carried out by a part-time Doctorate in Education student who works as a Head of Department at an FE College. A list of the questions to be asked will be made available before interview.*

Why have I been chosen?

*You have been chosen because you agreed to be contacted to discuss leadership at the online survey stage of the research.*

What will happen to me if I take part?

*You will be interviewed by me at a mutually convenient date, time and location for up to forty minutes.*

Are there any benefits in my taking part?



*You will be given the opportunity to be sent a summary of my findings which may interest you as it will give an insight into the variety of backgrounds of today's FE Principals and the leadership approach they practice.*

Are there any risks involved?

*If anyone from your institution reads the completed thesis they may be able to identify you from basic information on your education or professional background. No more invasive data than this will be published and your name, or that of your place of employment, will not be used.*

Will my participation be confidential?

*All data collected will be in compliance with the Data Protection Act/University policy and the information will be stored and remain confidential (that is, data coded and kept on a password protected computer). Anonymity will also be assured.*

What happens if I change my mind?

*You have the right to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without any consequence.*

What happens if something goes wrong?

*In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact the chair of the ethics committee at the University of Southampton.*

Where can I get more information?

*Please contact Stephen Finch – S.R.Finch@soton.ac.uk*

## **Consent Form**

Study title:

**The influence of background and demographic factors on the leadership of  
further education principals**

Researcher name: **Stephen Finch**

*Please initial the box(es) if you agree with the statement(s):*

I have read and understood the information sheet and have had the  
opportunity to ask questions about the study

☐

I agree to take part in this interview and agree for my data to  
be used for the purpose of this study

☐

I agree to be recorded in this interview for the purpose of this study

☐

I understand my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw  
at any time without consequence

☐

Name of participant (print name).....

Signature of participant.....

Name of Researcher (print name) .....

Signature of Researcher.....

Date.....