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Citation for final published version:

James, David 2017. Professional identity, learning cultures and educational quality: some lessons from Further Education. *Wales Journal of Education* 19 (1) , pp. 107-124. 10.16922/wje.19.1.6

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16922/wje.19.1.6>

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# *Professional Identity, Learning Cultures and Educational Quality: Some Lessons from Further Education<sup>1</sup>*

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## ABSTRACT

This article argues that professional identity is central to the quality of educational provision, especially in vocational Further Education (FE). It revisits a relational and sociological approach to the study of teaching and learning, developed over a decade ago in *Transforming Learning Cultures in FE*, which is still the only large independent research project of its kind. The article illustrates the capacity of the ‘learning cultures’ approach to foster a deep understanding of professional identity and practice in context. More specifically, the analysis underlines the importance of ‘dual professionalism’ in vocational provision. Brief attention is given to the current process of Area Based Reviews and the currently influential Sainsbury review of technical education. The article concludes that there continues to be insufficient attention paid to professional identity as a resource in high quality provision.

**Key words:** Further Education, Wales, learning cultures, professional identity.

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## *Introduction*

There are many well-established concepts and frameworks that offer to help us appreciate the economic, social and occupational location of

professions and professional work. There is also an important literature giving insights about the nature of professional knowledge and how it operates. What is often more difficult to see is the relationship between such concepts and frameworks and the day-to-day practices and lived identities of professionals. How does professionalism look and feel 'on the ground'? What is a professional identity and how important is it? How does professional identity interact with more 'structural' features of institutions, and how does it relate to rapid changes in the organisation of work and workplaces?

This last question has a fresh urgency in the UK Further Education (FE) sector, and perhaps especially in England. As Keep has argued:

the current institutional funding and control model is the remnant of a different era. Born in a time of expectations of rising funding, centralised control, top-down policy design and direction, and designed to deliver national targets and blanket one-size-fits-all government programmes (for example, Train to Gain), it, and the institutions it has spawned, are relatively ill-suited to the era of constrained public resources and bottom-up innovation (not least on funding) into which we are now heading. (Keep, 2014: no p.n.).

The longstanding breadth and variety of purposes within and amongst FE colleges has sometimes been seen as a strength, at least internally, enabling the sector to respond positively to diverse major policy agendas in respect of vocational skills, second-chance education, youth unemployment and social cohesion (see James and Biesta, 2007). There have also been attempts to discern and articulate a different kind of focus, namely the optimum relationship of colleges to all aspects of their local communities (e.g. Sharp, 2011; AoC, 2012). However, it is reports such as those from Foster (2005) and Wilshaw (2013), diagnosing a lack of clear focus and too much diversity of mission, that have had more influence. Breadth and variety are now seen as problems to be overcome, and they receive unprecedented attention, not least through a government-facilitated process of Area Based Reviews (BIS, 2015, 2016). Rationalisation and greater focus may also follow from the recommendations of the 'Sainsbury Review' (Sainsbury, 2016) for the establishment of new institutional and organizational structures that may deliver a more focused and higher status technical education. In a difficult financial climate, such processes can be expected to foster fundamental change, and at an increasing pace. As the structures shift, with rationalisations by region, mergers, greater specialisation and fewer institutions, what is the likely impact on professional identity, and does it matter?

In this article I give consideration to such questions by revisiting a research project that closely examined the nature of the work of teachers in the English FE sector. I begin by offering a glimpse of how professionalism is normally approached as a topic, then I introduce the concept of a learning culture and what it offers for grasping the nature of professional work and identity. I argue that this 'relational' view is helpful for achieving a dynamic appreciation of the role of professional practice, knowledge and identity in educational settings, with a direct bearing on questions of quality. I also suggest that the link between professional identity and the quality of provision continues to receive far too little attention in the policy that is currently driving change.

*Well-established concepts and frameworks*

Professionalism is commonly and historically understood to refer to such things as specialist training and occupational knowledge, high standards, ethical codes, high relative occupational status and relatively high rewards. According to Freidson (2001), it may also be viewed as a 'logic' or 'ideology' pertaining to the partial control of work by specialist workers, where the alternatives are the market (consumer control) or bureaucracy (manager control). The 'structural functionalism' of Talcott Parsons (e.g. Parsons, 1951) remains a strong point of reference, setting out how professionalism might provide a collegial alternative to the sorts of hierarchies that come with bureaucracy and also an avoidance of the tensions of the market: instead, Parsons suggested, professionalism could promote rationality and social cohesion. This view has some affinity with a 'consensus' common-sense view of the professions, where the high status, high rewards and high workplace autonomy of certain professions is seen as thoroughly explicable with reference to the high talent of those entering the lengthy period of training, the specialist qualifications, the strong code of practice and the professional body to guarantee ongoing 'good standing'.

Such views are, however, open to a great deal of critique. Larson presents one of the most well-known objections in his assessment of the medical profession in the USA: 'Briefly, the richest profession in the world ... has worried very little, through its official representatives, about the collective value of health, which it purports to serve' (Larson, 2003: 460). As Kanés put it recently, 'in practice, the dominance of private over public interests has considerably dimmed belief that professionalism serves as a source of social cohesion' (Kanés, 2010: 6).

A different approach has taken the nature of professional *knowledge* as its starting-point. A well-known example in the UK and many parts of Europe would be Michael Eraut's work, based on a diagnosis that professional knowledge has been grossly under-conceptualised. Eraut offers a helpful beginning of a map of professional knowledge, distinguishing between propositional, personal and process knowledge (Eraut, 1994). The nature of professional knowledge is a central theme in Sennett's intriguing comparison of the medieval craft workshop and the modern hospital, whereby in both settings there are severe limits on which aspects of professional work (especially the best professional work) can be codified (Sennett, 2008). In a more recent analysis, professional knowledge and practice are seen as unsustainable and unaffordable in the longer term: technological changes in how expertise is made available in society that are well underway will continue and increasingly erode the monopoly that some occupations have thus far relied upon, possibly leading to an inexorable replacement of professionals by increasingly capable systems (Susskind and Susskind, 2015).

Although not central to the main argument of this paper, such debates are a vital part of the context for it, because they remind us of the deep roots of the idea of professionalism and its constituents, and also the seemingly endless puzzles that it presents. Whether we are looking at the practices and values of policymakers, college managers and governors, or groups and individuals who teach, there appear to be various 'professionalisms of the imagination' which powerfully inform expectations – both positively and negatively – even in the face of radical change in the organisation of work and the structure of the labour market. Such changes are not to be underestimated. For example, in many professional occupations there has been rapid intensification of work and a great deal more of the work itself involves the following of set procedures. Through what has been termed 'digital Taylorism', algorithms and computer-based systems replace many of the tasks formerly carried out by the more experienced professionals who in earlier times made judgements on a case-by-case basis. These changes also have an important global dimension, a point that challenges the whole premise of a 'knowledge economy' and the association of that term with the nation-state (see Brown et al., 2011). In some cases, the specialist knowledge of the 'developed nation' professional is not only more widely available, but has become more codified and more portable, travelling to the global south, to countries where labour costs are far lower. The publishing industry is an especially good example of this trend.

So important though they are, my immediate concern is not with the more grand conceptions of professions and professional work, but instead with another perspective, one which pays close attention to the nature of *professional identity*, though without losing sight of the meso and macro levels and how these are enmeshed with the micro level. This 'learning cultures' perspective was developed some ten years ago within a particular research project, described briefly in the following section.

*A 'learning cultures' approach*

The concept of learning cultures was developed within the project Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education ('the TLCFE project'). Running from 2001 to 2005, this project was part of a larger programme of work, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council and others, called the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). The study was applied and practice-based: in Furlong and Oancea's (2005: 9) terms, it was 'research conducted in, with and/or for practice'. At the design stage there was consultation with groups of people working in various roles in the FE sector in England. Once under way, the project's core team to some extent blurred the usual boundary between 'researchers' and 'the researched', incorporating project directors and researchers from four universities and seconded staff from four FE colleges. An extended team also included 'participating tutors' who were both subjects of the research and partners in the research process. The main point about this design is that it enabled a very close examination of teaching and learning (and associated practices) over a period of around two years. The study included a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, with data gathered through interviews with tutors, students and managers, student questionnaires, classroom observations, extensive tutor diaries, records of peer shadowing and a range of documents. Although the main aims of the project were to deepen understanding of the complexities of learning in FE and to identify, implement and evaluate strategies for the improvement of learning opportunities, a great deal of the data and analysis centred on professionalism, drawing attention to the importance of the embodied, dispositional aspects of professional work, and the meanings and consequences of professional identity. The study included specific extensions in Wales (e.g. Jephcote and Salisbury, 2009) and Scotland, and remains to this day the only large-scale independent research project focused on teaching and learning in the FE sector in the UK.

The aim ‘understanding the complexities of learning’ was chosen and refined with great care. The core team designing the project was aware that in the English FE sector, learning and the outcomes of learning were usually understood through institutional devices like ‘level’, or were approached from particular psychological and individualized angles. The team was also aware that concepts like ‘learning style’ were given great credence in systems set up to handle the relationship between colleges and learners. Against this backdrop, the project included a strong collective desire to approach learning from a more ‘anthropological’ position, asking research questions like ‘what is happening here in the name of learning, and how does that confirm or depart from the claims made by individuals and institutions?’ Certain theoretical sources were therefore compelling allies in the research, including Bourdieu, Dewey, and Lave and Wenger’s situated learning theory (for an account of the theoretical aspects of the project, see Hodkinson et al., 2007; James and Biesta, 2007).

The most concise definition of a learning culture arising from the research is that it is ‘the social practices through which people learn’ (James and Biesta, 2007: 23). However, it is perhaps more helpful to conceive a learning culture as an assemblage of inter-connected elements arranged in a series of concentric circles around any given practice, but all of which are in some way intrinsic to that practice: and whilst they are all implicated in the practice, not all the elements are always immediately visible. Such elements may include:

- the positions, dispositions and actions of students and tutors;
- the nature of subject content and identity, particularly in relation to other disciplines and activities;
- college management and organisation, physical location and resourcing;
- national policies and regimes for funding, quality, inspection; and
- wider social and economic contexts.

These elements are often treated as (mere) ‘contexts’ for learning. However, they can and do operate to permit, promote, inhibit or prevent certain kinds of learning activity. Crucially, the concept of ‘learning culture’ challenges the conventional ‘common sense’ idea that teaching, learning or assessment are best understood as isolated practices that are fundamentally individual, mainly cognitive activities that happen to be located in an institutional, geographical, political or economic context or setting. The concept implies an epistemological shift, towards seeing learning as set

practices that both *represent* and actively *re-present* social arrangements. Practices of teaching, learning and assessment embody, reproduce and sometimes challenge social structures, relationships and beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

The research revealed how a great deal of what happens in the name of learning, in FE colleges at least, is highly structured by systems and mechanisms of inspection, funding and audit, as well as the position of the specific course or qualification in various relationships and hierarchies of provision. Also important was the nature of the relationship to a vocational field, or to other vocational and academic programmes. Teachers, managers and students did a great deal to reshape these effects in various ways, and were themselves important contributors to the learning culture in accordance with their dispositions, values or pedagogic preferences. Nevertheless, it was all too easy to overestimate their autonomy, and whilst teachers were increasingly held individually accountable for the nature and quality of teaching and learning, their scope to intervene, to act to bring about improvements in teaching and learning, was often very limited indeed, and sometimes minimal. In sum, the project demonstrated that the learning culture presented a series of affordances and constraints with fundamental pedagogic effects (James and Wahlberg, 2007).

#### *Learning cultures and professionalism*

One of the main outcomes of the research was to show that the various systems for funding, quality assurance and management often worked in opposition to their declared purposes, paradoxically jeopardising or damaging the quality of learning in FE colleges. Tutors' own concepts and values around professionalism (and specifically, definitions of what constituted high quality teaching and learning, ethical assessment, or a worthwhile engagement with students) appeared to be strongly held and were surprisingly resilient in the face of the shifting demands of those systems, operating rather like a moral compass. This is not to imply that the tutors' concepts and values were automatically superior to other concepts, but rather to underline their immense significance for practices. A good example of this would be the case of Gwen (introduced in what follows, but discussed further in James and Diment, 2003; James and Biesta, 2007).

Gwen was an experienced teacher of entry and lower-level business studies and office practice courses, who had come into teaching after



having worked in a series of jobs in commercial settings. Her journey into teaching was typical of the ‘long interview’ experienced by many staff in the FE sector, in that she had started out on a very part-time basis, gradually building up to a full-time job over several years. Also, like many of her FE colleagues, Gwen’s own achievements as an adult learner in post-compulsory and work-focused learning had outshone those of her earlier schooling. This helps us understand her high commitment to the sector and to helping other people to learn. Gwen appears to share strong dispositional elements with many other FE teachers, who see their task as providing ‘second chances’ for those who failed in (or were failed by) schooling, and primarily as ‘establishing appropriate relationships ... which provide the necessary basis for changing students’ understandings of themselves as learners and their learning behaviours’ (Jephcote and Salisbury, 2009: 970).

Yet Gwen’s story cannot be fully understood without grasping its location in changing structures. The 1990s had seen the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in the UK. Amongst the main drivers for these new competence-based qualifications were policy goals of raising the net levels of skill so as to contribute to a more competitive economy, and constructing a more comprehensible, uniform and comparable framework of vocational qualifications, both of which goals are strongly re-articulated in the recent Sainsbury review (Sainsbury, 2016). It is also likely that a political will for a greater degree of privatization played a part, and public-sector colleges soon found themselves increasingly competing with private providers in an ‘assessment market’. The new qualifications incorporated a behaviourist view of learning and its measurement as performance (Eraut, 1994; Tarrant, 2000) and diminished the role of underpinning knowledge (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011; Young, 2011). Crucially, they introduced a division between ‘learning’ and ‘assessment’ on the basis that some individuals were ready to have their competence certified without having to ‘serve time’ in an established course of study.<sup>3</sup> As a result, a new category of FE college worker quickly developed, one concerned with the ‘assessment of competence’ rather than with teaching, learning and assessment as they had been operated in longer-standing arrangements. The nature of Gwen’s work had shifted rapidly, just before our study, from teaching in a college classroom to visiting workplaces and assessing competences in processes that would lead to student certification.

This new role presented Gwen with a set of demands that she found impossible to meet in the way they had been prescribed and resourced. As it turned out, the learning/assessment disaggregation of the NVQ regime appeared to run ahead of reality, and the individuals she met in workplaces were not simply people ready to be assessed against a competences framework. Gwen was continually struck by what they needed to learn, and the opportunities, materials and support that could be put in place to help them do so. Gwen provided (or secured through extensive negotiation) these opportunities, materials and support: she kept a bank of printed resources in her car, and persuaded the candidates' line-managers to re-arrange tasks so that the candidates had opportunities to experience new categories of activity and reflect on them in a structured manner. In other words, her values and experience – her professional identity – gave her a strong sense of what was required for successful student learning *and* the motivation to provide it, even though these things were not required, expected or resourced by the college. Our analysis of this and similar situations suggested that a strong 'dispositional' professional identity (or professional habitus) could not be simply erased, over-written or overridden by a change in the definitions of learning and assessment at the level of policy. However, these changes did mean that the systems and infrastructure in which Gwen worked were radically altered, and this led her (and other tutors like her) to act, increasingly, 'under the radar' in order to achieve the job they knew to be necessary. Importantly, this 'underground learning' was a form of self-exploitation, and unsustainable in the long term. It represents something well beyond the more familiar phenomenon of the 'work-around' or that of 'going the extra mile', features that apply to many workers in many jobs.

In one sense, Gwen (and others like her) were attempting to rescue learning opportunities (and therefore, learners) from a new regime that was premised on the idea that the measurement of skilled performance was all that really mattered and that *processes of learning* could often be dispensed with. In subsequent years, and of necessity, this weakness of the NVQ model forced the rediscovery of the importance of learning, and the underpinning knowledge in skilful performance was increasingly acknowledged (Young, 2011). The original NVQ view of learning may be understood as an extreme variant of the now-familiar elevation of economic and human capital outcomes above all other concerns in educational endeavour (see Ball, 2008). If so, there seems an interesting parallel here with Watkins's meta-analysis of school classrooms, which

shows that as young people pass through schooling in England, the process becomes increasingly performance- and goal-focused, with a concomitant neglect in respect of 'learning orientation'. Watkins argues convincingly that a strong learning orientation is a necessary condition for sustaining performance. If he is right, then the shift represents a fundamental threat to educational quality and to the capacities of learners and (most ironically) to the capacities of future workers (see, for example, Watkins, 2010).

*The importance of dual professionalism*

In some of the other 'learning sites' studied in the TLCFE project, teachers attempted to improve or innovate in aspects of the learning culture but were more immediately thwarted by more powerful, structural elements. The most common sources of frustration for teachers of this kind were imposed changes associated with resources, or with the number of hours per week devoted to a course or module, or with new targets for student recruitment, retention, achievement and progression. Sometimes teachers described temporary disruptions to their normal practice during visits by quality inspectors, when they felt they should adjust their teaching to fit what the inspectors expected to see (or what their managers anticipated or insisted that inspectors would expect to see) so as to gain a high grade. A particularly telling example of this theme of the thwarting of pedagogic intent would be Paul, who was part of a small team responsible for the photography provision in one college. Paul and his colleagues were all experienced professional photographers and collectively their own work encompassed a range of commercial settings and applications. Paul's team decided that the students would benefit from the introduction of genuine (or near-genuine) photographic assignments, in which there was a real client, a negotiated specification, a deadline and an appreciation of costing. Students worked in pairs to complete these 'live brief' assignments, which usually involved a day or two working at the client's premises or at locations at some distance from the college. One might argue that Paul and his colleagues had successfully achieved something that a recent key report has reiterated as *the* most fundamental feature of high quality vocational provision, namely 'a clear line of sight to work' (LSIS, 2013: 4).

This innovation was a great success, in that the quality of the student work, their commitment to it and their enjoyment of it all increased. Paul told us that he and his colleagues were delighted that their courses now had

better links to the industry and that the external assessors attached to the courses had commented very positively on the change. However, the innovation did not last more than a few months. It collapsed quite suddenly when the provision was visited by auditors, whose tasks included checking that those students in receipt of a means-tested Educational Maintenance Allowance were officially recorded as being on college premises on every day of the week.<sup>4</sup> Paul and his colleagues had accurate records of student attendance, but students were not on college premises on those days when they were doing their 'live brief' assignments. The auditors told the college that without complete attendance records, they were in breach of regulations. Overnight, Paul and his colleagues were forced by college managers to cancel their innovation.

This case offers a good illustration of a more general point in the findings of the project. First, we have elements that are conventionally understood to be part of the *context* (the Education Maintenance Allowance designed to support students to continue their education or training; the work of auditors to ensure that the regulations surrounding financial matters were met). Secondly, we have teachers responsible for teaching and learning, whose qualities and characteristics are conventionally held to be the main (or even the only) determinant of the quality of the provision. However, as the example shows so well, the pedagogic settlement or arrangement is as much a product of systemic features (in this instance, assumptions built into auditing) as it is of the actions of teachers, and there is a sense in which Paul and his colleagues exposed some uncomfortably close limits to their scope to innovate in line with their professional judgement. Importantly, this professional judgement was deeply dispositional, rooted in *both* their teaching and vocational expertise. The outcome of this series of events was a loss of a vocational connection, a sharp downward turn in staff morale and a lowering of the standards of student work as judged by both tutors and external examiners/assessors.

A learning cultures perspective, partially derived from a Bourdieusian social theory, entails looking for the agency in structure and the structure in agency, encouraging us to look beyond immediate interactions in order to understand some aspect of the social world. The case of Paul and his colleagues suggests some uncomfortable tendencies in who has the most power to define the curriculum and pedagogy. It may be indicative of a 'UK problem' (perhaps especially an 'English problem'), for reasons such as the low status accorded to vocational programmes, the relatively recent adoption of mandatory teacher training in the FE sector and the generic (as

opposed to vocationally specific) nature of that teacher training. In contrast, some countries with strong vocational systems (e.g. Denmark, Finland and Germany) have specialised vocational teacher training programmes run by corresponding specialist centres in the higher education sector (Parsons et al., 2009). At the very least, this feature is likely to foster the general expectation that professional experience of the occupational context remains an important contributor to vocational education and training.

There are now many examples of research-based discussion of the challenges of offering high quality vocational education and training, particularly the issue of how to achieve a sufficiently close relationship between the college-based elements and the relevant workplaces. There is some recognition that vocational teachers need to base their pedagogical approaches on social theories of learning so that they can recontextualize or situate the content of their programmes for students (Evans et al., 2007). Others have shown how dual or hybrid professional identities can be harnessed to set up new courses and have underlined the centrality of an education–industry *dialogue* and how *this* is what makes courses truly ‘vocational’ (Higham and Farnsworth, 2012). An argument for ‘triple professionalism’ also draws attention to the necessity for continual partnership and adjustment to the wider ‘ecology’ in which provision is located.<sup>5</sup> A recent Swedish study shows the importance of continual ‘boundary crossing’ for vocational teachers, concluding that ‘teachers who manage to balance their teacher identities with their occupational identities by maintaining their participation in the different communities seem to be the best prepared to teach their vocational subjects’ (Fejes and Kopsen, 2014: 265).

Despite these and similar insights, in the UK there appears to be only a partial awareness that the ongoing relationship between the college/tutor and the vocational field is key to what is taught and learnt, and how it is taught and learnt (and is therefore central to the quality of vocational education and training). Because the derivation of standards and other forms of codification are so limited when it comes to professional knowledge and action, I would argue that professional identity is the ‘site’ for taking this agenda forward. There are potentially very high practical gains to be had from taking it seriously at programme, college and sector level (see, for example, LSIS, 2013). FE in Wales may have a particularly good opportunity to do so, following its recent rounds of institutional reorganisation (James and Unwin, 2015).

*The continuing marginalisation of professional identity*

As long ago as 2000, Frank Coffield drew attention to a major silence across whole swathes of policy focused on post-compulsory education and training:

In all the plans to put learners first, to invest in learning, to widen participation, to set targets, to develop skills, to open access, to raise standards, and to develop a national framework of qualifications, there is no mention of a theory (or theories) of learning to drive the whole project. It is as though there existed in the UK such a widespread understanding of, and agreement about, the processes of learning and teaching that comment was thought superfluous. The omission is serious, and, if not corrected, could prove fatal to the enterprise. (Coffield, 2000: 18)

Similarly, the TLCFE project's analysis showed that over the last fifty years or so, there had been repeated policy declarations about the need to improve teaching and learning, whilst the vast majority of the proposed remedies fell silent on the topic, focusing instead on systemic and institutional structures: this suggested that in some policy discourse, the topic of 'teaching and learning' was functioning as a scapegoat (Colley, Wahlberg and James, 2007).

In the introduction I mentioned Keep's analysis of an increasing mismatch between systems/institutions and a newer relative austerity, a serious reduction in resources and the promotion of bottom-up innovation. In light of that analysis, it is pertinent to ask to what extent professional expertise in the area of vocational education and training is visible in contemporary policy and policy-facing thinking. To date, the answer seems somewhat disappointing. First, the current Area Based Reviews process: this is designed to lead to the creation of 'clear high quality professional and technical routes to employment ... which allow individuals to progress to high level skills valued by employers' (BIS, 2015: 2). It aims to 'move towards fewer, often larger, more resilient and efficient providers' (BIS, 2015: 3), with new forms of collaboration across institutions. The greater specialization resulting from a review will help with the creation of 'a new network of prestigious Institutes of Technology and National Colleges to deliver high standard provision at levels 3, 4 and 5' (BIS, 2015: 2; and see BIS, 2016). In addition to 'proportionate' government involvement, the steering group responsible for each review includes a range of stakeholders, such as 'relevant chairs of governors of each institution, the FE and Sixth Form College Commissioners, local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and Regional Schools

Commissioners' (BIS, 2015: 5). There is no mention of any specific professional educator representation in the process, apart from a passing reference to the need to take into account the 'views of staff'.

Secondly, and at first glance, the 'Sainsbury review' of Technical Education (Sainsbury, 2016) is more promising in this regard, in that it contains a great many references to the term 'professional'. Yet in all but a small handful of cases, the term applies to proposed *panels of professionals* who will be appointed by an Institute for Apprenticeships as industry/sector representatives, with the task of generating industry-relevant standards. There is some acknowledgement that these will need to be supported by 'experienced education professionals' (Sainsbury, 2016: 10, 33) and that 'education professionals can help' with the devising of assessments (Sainsbury, 2016: 56). The most substantial mention of professional educators comes in a section entitled 'infrastructure', which says:

Good technical education requires expert teachers and lecturers and access to industry-standard facilities. College principals have told us that recruiting technical education teachers with well-developed pedagogical skills, mastery of their field and up-to-date industry experience can be a significant challenge in the competitive labour market. (Sainsbury, 2016: 66)

Again, this is a welcome acknowledgement of an important issue, but is also telling in its positioning of teachers as part of 'infrastructure' and its mention of a recruitment challenge with no further comment. A different approach might have seen the recruitment and development of such teachers, their ongoing role in working at the college/industry interface, and their representation in governance being at least as important as the structural features addressed in the core recommendations. This choice or omission is ironic given that vocational teachers feature prominently in some of the international governance arrangements that are summarised in the appendix to the same report.

The Sainsbury proposals are bold, and may well lead to a more distinctive and more highly regarded technical education provision, but they also amount to a *technical solution* to a set of long-standing problems that are also *cultural* in their make-up and persistence. As the learning cultures perspective shows, how a new technical education plays out in practice (and whether or not it can be said to be of high quality) will depend on a great deal more than the efficiency of the production of new specifications and standards, how well matched these are to the currently conceived

needs of industrial sectors, and how widely recognised they become (important though all these are). The nature and quality of new provision will also be highly dependent on the identity, experience and values of those working with students, and their capacities to continue to make meaningful bridges between the provision and relevant workplaces. It will depend on how the new structures and arrangements interact with longer-standing identities, values and practices.

### *Conclusion*

If there is a general conclusion to be taken from all this, it is surely a re-affirmation of a point that was made forcefully some twenty years ago, when Goodson and Hargreaves (1996) described how crucial relational and emotional aspects of the teacher's work were marginalised by systems and discourses of 'professional standards'. The main perspectives on the nature of professionalism and professional knowledge, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, can usefully be augmented with a sociologically informed approach which seeks to connect everyday practices amongst professionals with the social structures and interests that surround them *and* shape or define large parts of their work. When we take this approach, we find embodied dispositional elements in conflict or harmony with rapidly changing demands; we find not only frustration or pleasure but also 'strategic compliance (Gleeson and Shain, 1999), 'principled infidelity' (Wallace and Hoyle, 2005) and 'underground learning' (James and Diment, 2003), all driven by strongly held and experientially rooted modes of working. This observation chimes with one of the conclusions of a recent major edited collection on the nature of professionalism, in which the author suggests that, contrary to the concerns of most of the existing theorisations, 'the burden of professionalism is carried by ethical work rather than knowledge structures' (Kanes, 2010: 197). The learning cultures perspective provides a way of uncovering this ethical work. If we are interested in high quality educational provision, vocational or otherwise, we must acknowledge that professional identity is more than an inconvenient by-product of past arrangements. It is, rather, a fundamental and dynamic component of provision, and at best, a resource to be used well.



*Acknowledgement*

I would like to thank the anonymous referees for their comments on an earlier version of this paper, which led directly to its development and improvement. Part of this work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, Grant Reference L139251025.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is a developed version of a paper first given at the conference 'Knowledge-based professions in transnational perspective: Cultures of gender, learning and work' –Technische Universität, Berlin, June 2015.
- <sup>2</sup> The learning cultures perspective has also been applied to the field of higher education assessment. See James (2014).
- <sup>3</sup> In the early days of National Vocational Qualifications, the phrase 'serving time' was often used in a pejorative way to signal declared shortcomings in existing vocational provision.
- <sup>4</sup> The Education Maintenance Allowance is a weekly payment to students to support them to study towards recognised qualifications. It is now discontinued in England, but continues in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Triple professionalism' refers to 'the ability of professionals to be experts in their own profession or subject area; to be inspirational and expert teachers; and to be able to work with other social partners, particularly in their locality or region. This approach to professionalism could be characterised as democratic, activist and ecological' (Gannon, 2014: 10).