

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IN FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES: A PILOT STUDY

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SYNOPSIS

There is an urgent need for academic research in further education in Scotland. This study exploring models of strategy operating in Scottish Further Education colleges has two broad aims: to assess the applicability of each of the models and to outline the policy and practical implications of the findings; and to identify areas requiring further and sustained research to bring Scottish further education into mainstream education and management research.

The first model of strategy considered was strategic control from the centre. This model had some relevance but was limited in providing a full explanation of the relationship between colleges and their principal stakeholder, the SOEID. Further research is required on the further education policy community and on the roles which existing agents play in this community. Second, a model of strategic fit emphasising the management of resources in an externally competitive environment was observed. This model was contextualised by a post-incorporation environment where colleges, now removed from local authority control, are relatively autonomous. An autonomy/competition matrix was constructed to diagrammatically represent this. The research found management practice attuned to this model, though 'excess competition' was in evidence with consequential policy implications.

Two emerging models of strategy were observed. One saw a growing use of organisational and sectoral strengths (core competencies) to grasp developmental opportunities. This perspective of strategy—'strategic stretch'—highlights the requirement of colleges to address their organisational infrastructure and internal capabilities. The final model—strategy as the management of networks—accentuated the strategic importance of group and network activity. The colleges studied illustrated considerable managerial activity which was group based. Three broad implications of this were identified: first, a need for colleges to understand the management of networks and the roles played by network members; second, a likely reconfiguration of the autonomy/competition matrix due to the strains the current configuration places on collaborative working; third, the desirability of constructing an agenda to research the further education policy community as it progresses through change.

INTRODUCTION

The pilot undertaken in a number of Scottish Further Education colleges, was funded and supported by the Scottish Further Education Unit. The seven colleges, represented a cross section of the sector in terms of size, student background, geographical location and diversity of programme provision. College Principals (in one college the Depute Principal) were interviewed and all participated fully and enthusiastically. The next two levels of managers completed a detailed pre-piloted questionnaire. The questionnaire response rate was high with almost 70% (46 individuals) responding.

In the article, the strategic management of colleges is examined from four perspectives. These are, the strategic relationship between college and the central government stakeholder, the SOEID, secondly, the attempt to manage the strategic fit of the external and internal environments particularly in the context of the 'new managerialism'. Finally, two emerging views of strategy are analysed: strategic stretch, and the strategic management of networks and partnerships.

STRATEGY AS CONTROL FROM THE CENTRE?

Strategic management has traditionally been viewed as the key means by which business and organisational purposes are implemented and controlled. Early conceptual frameworks by Chandler (1962) and Williamson (1975)—based on detailed research—explained strategic management in terms of strategic headquarters control over the operations of decentralised operational units (the strategic headquarters-strategic business unit model). The emphasis on centralisation implied in such views of strategic management has been challenged radically in the last ten years or so (e.g., Buzzel and Gale 1987; Mintzberg 1983). One of the leading writers on strategic management (Mintzberg 1994) now views strategy in terms of broad organisational intentions, the intended strategy, within which a realised strategy is ‘allowed’ to emerge—the realised strategy. This has led some to question whether the realised strategy is a strategy at all, or merely a post hoc rationalisation of events (Collinge 1996).

Such centre/control concepts of strategy have had some impact in public sector practice in the 1980s and 90s. Strategic control from the centre has formed part of the public sector agenda from the late 1970s and there is an increasing body of practice and research outlining a thrust towards increased centralised control over policy while creating operationally decentralised units in most areas of the public sector (Hogget 1996).

An analysis of the relationships between individual colleges and the principal stakeholder (SOEID) reveals some appeal of the centre-operating unit framework. In the schools sector (especially in England) the ‘nationalisation’ of the curriculum has been portrayed as a centralisation of control despite often being accompanied by symbols of participation and partnership at local and institution level (Coolison 1994). Although there is no equivalent to a national curriculum in further education, it has been suggested that the NVQ/SVQ framework provides part of a package of central control of further education via the removal, to a degree, of professional discretion in education and training programme delivery (Randle and Brady 1997). Direction from the centre can be seen in much of what colleges do: incorporation legislation gave colleges some statutory responsibilities; currently there are discussions and proposals on elements of funding being linked to student achievement. In terms of prescriptive approaches, some attempts were made (however crudely) under the Regional Education Authorities in Scotland to manage and centrally control some programme provision in a number of colleges.¹

Such frameworks are however less than adequate in providing a comprehensive explanation of the relationship between colleges and their principal funder and stakeholder—Scottish Office. There is little general prescription of programme activity (though this can occur from time to time as in the capping of new Higher National activity in certain colleges), and there is a substantial diversity of provision. The consideration of policy networks provides a fuller explanation of the strategic relationship between colleges and Scottish Office. Colleges are involved in participative and consultative networks (e.g., at present, over matters such as curricular changes, management of student bursaries and very importantly, design of a new funding regime). Discussions with college principals in this pilot study has mirrored earlier research (Pfeffier and Salanick 1978, Rhodes and Marsh 1992) indicating that key motivations for network relationships are the search for resource certainty, the attempt to routinise relationships to promote continuity and stability. The precise identification and explanation of the activities of networks provides the basis for much fruitful research, outwith the scope of this short pilot study. While the educational policy network—and within this the further education network—was relatively stable in the post war period to the early 1970s, it dramatically changed with the changing relationships between local and central government through the

late 70s and 1980s, and radically changed with the removal of colleges from local authority control in 1993 (Rhodes 1991, Levacic 1993). The schools sector has been relatively well researched in Scotland (Humes 1986, 1997, McPherson and Raab 1988), and while some research has been undertaken into the post-16 sector local governance networks in south east London (Riley 1997), the national post-16 dimension in Scotland remains generally under-researched. Research could identify for each of the participants in the network rules, purposes and structures, finance, ideology, allocation of tasks—which are bargained, negotiated and exchanged. Researching how the policy community operates through the likely changes facing further education in the coming years will be fascinating in its analysis of continuity and open/closed nature of the FE policy networks (for contrasting though complementary approaches, see McPherson and Raab 1988, adopting a sociological/policy development approach; Humes 1986, using techniques of discourse analysis, a methodology now used to explore cultural issues in business organisations, though neither author specifically addresses further education), and how a managerialist approach interfaces with—or is fractured from—policy issues (Humes 1994). These are tasks beyond the scope of this study, nonetheless there are practical implications of the network or systems (Leech 1994) approach for the actors and players, ‘learning how to play a part in managing policy influence flows, proactively or reactively—in the interests of the [further education] service as a whole’ (Leech 1994 p. 143).

STRATEGIC FIT AND COLLEGE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT: ALIGNING THE EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL ENVIRONMENTS; THE NEW MANAGERIALISM

For much of the 1980s and 90s the concept of strategic fit has driven strategic management thinking (Johnson and Scholes 1997). The crux of this approach rests on an analysis of the external environment which is then matched and aligned with the organisation’s internal resources (Andrews 1980, Christensen *et al.* 1983, Johnson and Scholes 1997). The key function of senior management in such a framework is to identify the strategic issues which must be addressed (Ansoff 1980, King 1982, Pflaun and Delfont 1987). Many strategic management consultancy tools like SWOT Analysis are based on such a view of strategic management.

Developments in further education since 1993 have been influenced by this approach, in particular the important requirement of colleges to prepare an annual Development Plan (laid down in the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, Scotland).

Viewing the college development plan in this light: the college community’s (whether defined geographically or in other ways) training and learning needs are identified (i.e., the environment) then staffing allocation, physical building, classroom and material needs (the internal resources) are allocated to the plan. With resources allocated to the plan, strategic management activities (the strategic issues) are in large measure formed by the need to align internal resources to the funding available, monitoring and controlling to ensure costs are kept within limits, ensuring that quality and other outputs are maximised.

This approach to strategic management—especially the management of internal resources—has been overlaid (as in most parts of the public sector since the 1980s) by the ‘new managerialism’, the features of which are: an emphasis on decentralisation of managerial responsibility and functions including strict financial management and devolved budgetary controls; efficient resource usage; use of performance indicators; development of consumerism and market discipline cultures and processes, including competition; consumer charters as mechanisms for accountability; creation of flexible workforces and staff appraisal systems; the assertion of managerial control (Pollit 1990, 1993, Farnham and Horton 1996). How well do the strategic fit and new managerial models explain practice at individual college level?

SCANNING AND ANALYSING THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

The extent to which the external environment/market was analysed was patchy, though one college in some of its programme areas analysed the market very thoroughly indeed, using quantitative market research techniques. The results are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Method of Assessing Market for College Programmes

Score 1 – 5: 1 = low; 5 = high

	1	2	3	4	5	% responding to the question
Reference to past provision	0	2	12	24	48	86
Assessing labour market intelligence	5	19	29	24	10	87
Market research	2	19	38	24	7	90
Product testing	10	12	19	26	17	84

The significant use of past provision is not surprising especially if previously run programmes have been buoyant; past programmes bring a historical infrastructure which colleges cannot ignore. Although patchy, analysis of the external environment may be more sophisticated than the figures suggest. Many external relationships which senior staff and others have may in fact provide the basis of informal market intelligence.² All colleges in the pilot made use of European funding which is programme allocated on the basis of some form of market and environmental intelligence at national, regional and sub-regional levels.

MANAGING RESOURCES

Once known, the funding base provided presents to the college the most significant part of its ‘realised’ environment—that is its market and financial parameters. How does the management of resources in colleges align with this environment? The findings are consistent with research elsewhere (Warner and Croswaite 1995) with much management effort being put into resource efficiency. All colleges had senior finance personnel, some at Assistant Principal level (a major and significant change from the pre-incorporation era); moreover, survey findings showed financial responsibility (including staffing) devolved to managers at two levels below principal—a devolution which brought with it accountability. Target setting as a means of resource control was deeply embedded in all the levels of management researched—and in some colleges was well grounded at lower levels. See Tables 2(a) and 2(b).

*Table 2(a): Target Setting and Reporting—Second/Third Level Managers**

	Yes	No	% responding
Responsibility for ensuring targets are met	88	7	65

How is this responsibility actioned and implemented?

	Yes	No	% responding
Discussion at a senior management team forum	71	26	96
Through an appraisal with line manager	52	21	73
Through a discussion with line manager	81	5	86

*Table 2 (b): Target Setting and Reporting—
Staff Reporting to Third Level Managers*

	Yes	No	% responding
Responsibility for ensuring targets are met	81	12	93

How is this responsibility actioned and implemented?

	Yes	No	% responding
Through group or team discussion	67	5	72
Through an appraisal with line manager	38	19	57
Through a discussion with line manager	59	7	66

* There was no uniform management structure in the colleges studied. First level manager is defined as Principal (or Depute); second level as Assistant Principal; third level titles vary e.g. Heads of School, Faculty Heads, Sector Managers.

In terms of human resource management, research in other parts of the public sector has indicated that polarisation between managerial staff and others through implementation of aspects of the ‘new managerial agenda’ has been less noticeable where managers have come from ‘within’ (Kirkpatrick *et al.* 1996). All the Principals were from within the FE sector as were most of the other (second and third level) managers studied, and although the research did not address management-staff relationships per se, little evidence was found of polarisation. A small number of colleges in Scotland have though experienced industrial relations or other human resource difficulties, some of which can be related to personnel and organisational restructuring which in turn can be linked to the new managerial agenda. These cases have been well documented in the press media.

More generally, the management of resources was considered by all as an improvement on pre-incorporation arrangements. A less than positive view of pre-incorporation arrangements has also been indicated in other research (Gorringe and Togood 1994).³

The consumerism-customer focus aspects of the new managerial agenda were well evidenced and had a significant impact on internal resource management systems and processes. All colleges in the sample had—or were advancing towards—Investors in People and/or British or International Standards Accreditation, while one college had a Citizen’s Charter.

THE COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENT

A key contextual feature of the new managerialism and the strategic fit model in further education has been an environment which is (at least quasi-) competitive in nature, due to the allocation of a fixed global sum, an encouragement of growth and (albeit constrained) competitive bidding through a student unit of measurement allocation system. Although the degree of competitiveness varies both within and between colleges the findings summarised in Table 3 are clear enough.

Table 3: Competition in Further Education Colleges

Score: 0 = competition non-existent; 5 = competition very high

	0	1	2	3	4	5
How severe is competition from other colleges in Scotland?	0	7	17	19	29	26
How severe is competition from other training providers in Scotland?	0	5	20	38	19	14

(% totals for each question do not necessarily equal 100. This is due to rounding to the nearest % point).

The competitive environment is in effect the creation of two interrelated developments—the new managerialism and the removal of further education colleges from local authority control in 1993. With competition has come increasing levels of managerial autonomy for colleges. The shift and positioning of colleges can be represented diagrammatically using the indices of autonomy and competition:

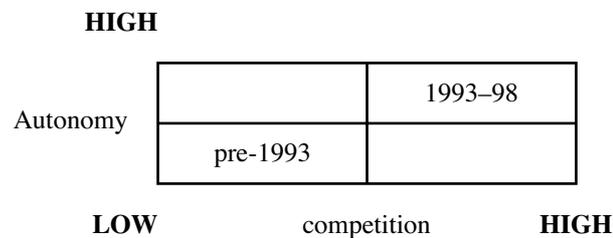


Figure 1

Indicators of the level of autonomy:

- Courses which must be provided
- Specific direction from funders
- Freedom to initiate programmes and other developments
- Prescribed business and development plans
- Prescribed financial systems
- Freedom to enter collaborative partnerships
- Authority and responsibility to appoint staff—up to which level of seniority?

There are some implications and issues and issues facing FE in the context of the strategic fit model and its integral matrix of autonomy and competition. In all of the colleges studied the Principals welcomed the post incorporation environment in particular the increased autonomy which this brought. Such a finding is hardly surprising. The consequences of a competitive environment (and competition was clearly perceived—see table 3) are a little more complex. While ‘pure’ competition as found in business-market contexts does not exist (e.g., it is unlikely that SOEID would permit a college to go bankrupt) there are penalties for failure to compete effectively: higher than average unit cost structures and failure to achieve student numbers (SUMS—student units of measurement) can lead to college restructuring and in some cases staff reductions. Conversely competitive success can lead to greater funding enabling growth, market and organisational development. There are examples of winners and losers in this quasi-competitive environment, information which is in the public domain.

All of the Principals interviewed felt that the environment was over competitive and the comment from one ‘that the balance between autonomy competition and collaboration was not quite right’ can be said to represent a consensus view. This it should be added is consistent with recent Ministerial statements⁴ and is of significance in the context of the two emergent views of strategy now outlined.

EMERGING VIEWS OF STRATEGY

Strategy as Stretch

Where theories of fit prioritise the matching and planning of resources to meet the environmental (market) opportunities or threats, stretch theories analyse the internal core competencies and capabilities of the organisation which are then stretched (often, the research indicates, in the context of resource constraint) to the market, and improved, developed and adapted to meet challenges and changes in the environment (Hamel and Prahalad 1994, Kay 1993). In some instances core competencies and capabilities can be stretched to redefine markets. This was apparent in the colleges researched: networking and contact skills of a particular Board member in one college have led to the creation of a specific overseas market opportunity; collaborative and programme development skills have led to a marked increase in the further education open learning market through a collaborative joint college venture. Another core competence of many colleges is the mix of activities and abilities used to access non-traditional participants into further and higher education (e.g., as outlined in the Kennedy Report 1997). In the short-medium as well as the longer term, colleges will be expected to use and develop such competencies in response to a governmental agenda of increased access to further and higher education post Garrick and Dearing, through the New Deal Initiative and the awaited government policy position on lifelong learning.

If colleges are to devise strategies to stretch to these challenges, work and research is required:

- to identify and define the required competencies for these market opportunities
- to assess if these are broadly in line with current capabilities and processes
- to determine whether the appropriate organisational structures and mechanisms are in place.⁵

Strategy as the Management of Networks and Partnerships

Much current research highlights the strategic importance of an organisation's 'corporate architecture'—the configuration of its internal and external networks and relationships (Kay 1993)—and also the importance of defining the roles which each member in the network plays, e.g., the broker, the lead broker, the architect (Miles, Snow and Coleman 1992). Little research has been done in this area for the further education sector.

The conceptual framework of policy networks was previously mentioned in the context of strategic relationships between colleges and the principal funder-stakeholder (the SOEID). Using a broader definition of networks to include internal and external working partnership arrangements, the research indicated the extensive involvement of those surveyed in networks, both internal and external to the college as indicated in Tables 4 (a) and 4 (b).

*Table 4 (a): Work Related Group Membership
(Internal and External to the College: Second and Third Level Managers)*

Internal Group Membership (%)

Managers with Internal Group Membership 100%

	Up to 10%	11- 20%	21- 30%	31- 40%	41- 50%	Over 50%
Time spent by these managers in working groups within functional/departmental/faculty, etc., area (%)	47	34	8	3	3	6
Time spent by these managers in cross-college groups (%)	41	38	16	6	0	0

External Group Membership (%)

Managers with Membership of Groups External to the College 74%

	Up to 10%	11- 20%	21- 30%	31- 40%	41- 50%	Over 50%
Time spent by these managers in groups external to the college	84	13	0	3	0	0

*Table 4(b): Work Related Group Membership
(Internal and External to the College): Staff Reporting to Third Level Managers*

Internal Group Membership (%)

Staff with Internal Group Membership 79%

	Up to 10%	11- 20%	21- 30%	31- 40%	41- 50%	Over 50%
Time spent by these staff in working groups within functional/departmental/faculty, etc. area	71	29	0	3	0	0

Staff in cross-college groups 39%

	Up to 10%	11-20%	21-30%	31-40%	41-50%	Over 50%
Time spent by these staff in cross-college groups	84	16	0	0	0	0

External Group Membership (%)

Staff with membership of Groups external to college % 19%

	Up to 10%	11-20%	21-30%	31-40%	41-50%	Over 50%
Time spent by these staff in groups external to the college	71	29	0	0	0	0

These networks included arrangements for joint purchasing with other colleges, advocacy and public relations, participation in professional bodies, participatory and consultative processes, and within colleges, matrix type structures to deliver learning programmes and to enable managerial facilitation and control. They covered the full spectrum from exchange to systemic networking where symbiotic relationships were based on achieving common goals (Alter and Hage 1993).

The importance of these emerging models of strategy in the colleges raises some important policy considerations. First, the autonomy-competition matrix may require reconfiguration. While network and collaborative approaches to strategy are not necessarily incompatible with competition⁶, and indeed within a competitive environment much collaboration already takes place, an overemphasis on competition will obviously place strains on certain types of collaborative and network arrangements. The reconfigured matrix might look as follows:

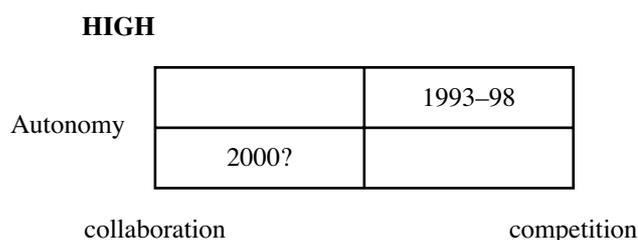


Figure 2

Indicators of collaboration/competition:

- Targeting the same geographical and programme market segments as other providers (in a slow growth context).
- Degree of top sliced or safety net funding thereby adjusting the global sum available for formula distribution. Significant degree of top sliced funding can be both competition inhibiting (for those receiving funding in this way) and competition enhancing — for colleges competing for a share of a thereby reduced sum.
- Partnership arrangements with other colleges for programme design and delivery.
- Market entry by new providers; exit of existing providers; mergers and rationalisation.

Secondly, how the reconfiguration is achieved will ultimately depend on the policy process. Broad options to modify competition and autonomy include regulation and indication from the centre (SOEID). Regulation possibilities could see rationalisation through college merger. Some believe this to be inevitable in the medium—long run; informal discussions have taken place between some colleges in Scotland.⁷ Such initiatives will be politically sensitive and one proposed merger between two Glasgow monotchnical colleges has been vetoed by SOEID. Other forms of regulation include funding support for collaborative arrangements between colleges. ‘Strategic Funding’ is now available to colleges for this. Other regulatory initiatives like attempts to restrict college freedom to deliver specific programmes are likely to be resisted.

Indication from the centre by way of ‘indicative guidance’ on programme or client provision would affect autonomy however willing colleges were to ‘play ball’, particularly if such indication comes with performance measures. Given the change in UK Government in 1997 and the advent of the Scottish Parliament, social policy is likely to be more proactive than in the past decade. Further education will be expected to play a part in this agenda with initiatives to combat social exclusion, promote life long learning, and employability training.

The management of this process is a fascinating topic for research. Leech (1994) has shown how the Scottish further education sub-government successfully adapted to the major disruption in the break with local authority control up to. Analysis of the further education sub government and policy community at present will include a new component in the system: 43 independently incorporated colleges all with powerfully constituted non executive directors (Boards of Management).

CONCLUSION

The research indicated different models of strategic management practice in the colleges. There was no dominant model, and all four models and approaches were evident in all the colleges studied. A central control model explained aspects of the relationship between central government and colleges, but considerable network and participative policy formulation activity signposts the importance of prioritising future research in this area. This will build on the work already carried out by Leech (1994) and others.

Competition, collaboration and autonomy were key aspects of the strategic management practices observed. A post incorporation competitive environment (if not strictly competitive by business—market benchmarks, then certainly so by the standards in further education pre 1992) had significant implications on college

management linked as it was to the new managerialism, common throughout the public sector from the 1980s. Colleges had considerable autonomy *vis-à-vis* the era of local authority control. There are now indications that the competitive/autonomous environment will be rebalanced with implications for college management. There were also signs that co-operative and collaborative working was of importance when two emerging models of strategic management were observed. The practical issues for colleges go beyond the competitive considerations of the external environment and efficient resource management. Colleges will be required to : focus on internal development needs to maximise their strengths; understand how networks can be managed; appreciate the roles to be played within networks.

NOTES

1. Discussions with Principals who were in post pre-1993 indicated that attempts were made by Strathclyde and Lothian Regional Councils to allocate specific programmes to colleges to rationalise provision and avoid duplication.
2. The research uncovered some (confidential) evidence of this.
3. Gorringe and Togood (1994) argue that incorporation in 1993 represented a shift 'from an unequal struggle with a capricious allocator of funds, to the need to attract, retain and delight paying customers, whether they be a quango, a private company or an individual.' (Gorringe and Togood 1994, p. 186).
4. Mr Brian Wilson, Minister of State at the Scottish Office referred to the 'folly' of an over-competitive environment in further education in parts of Scotland—Meeting of the Association of Scottish Colleges (June 1997). Mr Wilson has since moved to another Government Department, but no statement has been made by his successor to contradict this thinking.
5. Important work and literature now stresses the significance of appropriate structures and other organisational arrangements to ensure core capabilities are maximised. This lies behind much of the thinking on the 'learning organisation'. The leading text in the field is Senge, P. (1990) *The Fifth Discipline: the Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation*, New York: Doubleday/Century.
6. Collaborative working is increasingly seen as a means to being more competitive. For example, further and higher education bodies are encouraged to collaborate for research and programme funding giving a greater critical mass to combat non-Scottish and overseas competition (see *Guardian*, January 19, 1998); Glasgow further education colleges collectively bid for European training moneys with outcomes far in excess of what individual competitive bids from colleges could realistically expect. Companies are actively encouraged to view relationships with suppliers, customers, educational and research institutions and others as obligational rather than adversarial (Sako 1992), and as 'symbiotic and organic' rather than 'exploitative and extractive'. It is argued that the organisation which can use partnership and network type arrangements in this way will be the most successful, and in a market environment, the most competitive (Moore 1996).
7. This information was received confidentially, and is not necessarily related to any college in the pilot.

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