Understanding the Dynamics of the Employability Agenda in Further Education Colleges in England
New Cross College – A Case Study

Research Project
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Abstract
This study explores the dynamic of what happens within a further education college in order to develop an understanding of the cultures, systems and processes that are used to socially construct meaning around work and employability. It is an inductive approach and is based on a case study of a further education college in South London. The case study is analysed through the metaphor of an “extended family” and draws on social learning theory which is predicated on meaning and identity being created through social interaction (Wenger, 1998). What has become apparent from being immersed within that extended family of the College, from interviews with staff and students, interacting in social activities, observing classes and reviewing many of its artefacts is perhaps an unremarkable conclusion. The work of the family is not primarily about imparting a given set of skills (although that plays an important part) but in the formation of identity: “because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity” (Wenger, 1998, p. 215).
A major task for the College is to build self belief in developing the identity of learners and assist them to make new meaning so that they can transact effectively in economic life. To the extent that one can examine and comprehend the organisational DNA of a further education college there are markers here, genes if you will, that can be passed across generations of learners that adapt and shift to survive in life beyond the boundaries of this community. This study constructs a narrative around that research experience to respond to that primary research question about how the dynamics of the employability operate within a college. The answer is partial, limited and perhaps only grabs at a corner of what is really going on within the College. With those caveats and disclaimers what follows is the story of how a discourse takes root and flourishes within a learning community. It points to the need to re-set the relationship between FE colleges and government to promote greater coherence between policy and practice.
Acknowledgements

This research project tracks the journey of a community of learners which in many respects mirrors my own personal journey throughout this Masters course. I began this course on the boundary of a learning community trying to negotiate meaning – making sense of my own personal circumstances and finding ways to connect with the discourse that formed the virtual classroom. Like the journey of the learners at the College, which is the subject of this study, that journey was not a straightforward one. Learning is a risky endeavour for both the learner and the teacher but as the Vice Principal I interviewed said if we stop learning we curl up and die as animals do. Like many others I have often referred to the transformational nature of learning but it is only through this research that I have really come to understand what that means.

There have been many people who have helped and provoked the thinking in this study. I have been inspired and challenged by the learners and staff at the College. They have given me a perspective which I would never have gained from the many books written about adult education. My colleagues at work, who have patiently listened, week after week, to the gestation process of this research and rescued tasks when my mind was totally absorbed in thinking through this research. The other members of the course – particularly the Swedish cohort – who have shared in the experience of grappling with the challenges of undertaking primary research. Of particular note is Jan Weiten who has been my learning partner, good friend and companion on this course – her counsel and good humour has been invaluable. Professor Madeleine Abrandt-Dahlgren, who has patiently and skilfully guided me through this process and offered her wisdom just when I seemed to need it. I am especially grateful to the Swedish Government and the Swedish taxpayer who have funded this journey of learning, demonstrating how Sweden continues to lead the way in forming new communities across boundaries.

My partner Mignonne and our two children, Madeleine and Nathaniel, who tolerated an absent husband and father over many weekends when I was locked away working on this report. Their support and forbearance is heartfelt.

I dedicate this work to my parents both of whom have now reached retirement and never enjoyed the benefits of education and have spent most of their working lives in low skilled jobs. This study, however a humble offering, makes a further contribution to understanding the relationship between learning and work.
1. Introduction: Contexts and Curiosities

1.1 Setting the Scene

Education policy in England, as in other European Union states, is replete with references to “employability” both as a design principle and as the main outcome for further education – increasingly the discourse is reaching into all forms of adult education that are funded by the state. Vocational educational policy in England is currently directed at remodelling further education to create a ‘demand-led’ system – that is, one driven by the needs of the economy – although the definition of what ‘demand-led’ means in practice remains abstract and unclear. The Treasury-led Leitch Review (HM Treasury, 2006) that accelerated this process puts the Government’s objective starkly:

Ensuring that only those qualifications approved by employers attract public funding will lead to a simplified qualification system, with fewer qualifications overall and only qualifications delivering economically valuable skills, attracting a return in the labour market, attracting public funding (p. 83).

Implicit in this discourse is that further education should not just be about imparting individuals with skills but it should also instil a set of values about work which are loosely defined as “employability” skills or being “work ready”. There are many definitions of employability (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005) but they typically state that “employability is the relative capacity of the individual to achieve meaningful employment given the interaction of personal circumstances and the labour market” (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005, p. 200). It is not surprising that some argue that “employability” is not a particularly clear notion nor readily definable.

In practice, employers argue employability is more about “soft skills” or “attitudes” rather than specific competencies to do functional tasks (as expressed in many vocational qualifications). Although “soft skills” are often cited as critical, how far a lack of soft skills act as a barrier to employment is not well researched (Mayor of London, 2007). Increasingly, both employers and governments have been critical of further education for not producing learners that are “job ready”. A recent survey of over 2000 employers in London found only 30% of respondents used the further education sector for training (Mayor of London, 2007, p. 41) perhaps symptomatic of their lack of confidence in publicly-provided vocational provision.

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1 In the context of this proposal “further education” is used here to mean vocational education provision in further education colleges in England which typically provide post 16 education which primarily has a vocational focus.
Providers of further education often argue that their mission is not just about preparing people for the world of work but also in broadening participation in education to promote social inclusion. Similarly, there is a strong tradition in the sector for “second chance” learning – a significant number of people that study in further education have not been able to succeed in traditional school settings and further education provides the means for re-engaging with formal learning. Accordingly, those within the further education sector are left holding these two “polarities” – a focus on employability whilst promoting personal development, social cohesion and broader democratic engagement. Coffield (2008) suggests:

The first priority of ‘skills for employability’ is slowly being mediated and misinterpreted in some colleges as if it were the only priority, and as a result social inclusion is in danger of being pushed to the margins. There are, for instance, many people attending FE colleges and adult and community centres who are unlikely ever to be able to, or to want to, acquire ‘economically valuable skills’, but whose learning needs deserve attention, respect and appropriate provision (p. 59).

One could argue that this apparent dichotomy for policy makers does not exist for practitioners who are familiar with the challenges of a complex world notwithstanding shifting resources and organisational priorities.

Whilst there are many studies which catalogue and debate the various characteristics of “employability” and the basket of skills and attributes necessary to make someone employable, there is little that explores how that agenda is prosecuted within the further education sector. There remains a binary view that the fault lies either in providers of further education not sufficiently adapting and understanding the employability agenda or that policy makers are blindly pursuing a rhetoric of shifting responsibility for employability to colleges who receive it alongside a range of other policy signals to make good the progress and advancement of individuals.

1.2 Aims and Research Questions
Given the consistently strong and recurring policy signals to make further education about achieving employment outcomes, what happens in colleges to that policy signal when it is translated into what is taught (curriculum), how it is taught (pedagogy) and what is privileged or seen as “valuable” (assessment)? Subsidiary issues are: what are the different interpretations of the concept of “employability” (policy)? How do leaders within further education promote “employability” in their offer and how is it delivered? How do teachers reflect their understanding of employability in teaching and learning?
This study does not attempt to pass judgement on whether “employability” as the principal outcome of further education is either “good” or “bad” but to explore the issues and develop an understanding how the issues of implementation are understood. Accordingly, to the extent that research can be “useful”, this study has the potential to inform understanding and bridge some of the expectation gaps that exist between those who produce education policy and those tasked with delivering it.
2. Broad Themes in the Literature on Employability

2.1 Introduction

Although this is an inductive study, it is useful to plot out some of the key concepts and debates around employability and how it is implemented and applied within further education colleges. There are numerous studies within the United Kingdom (eg LSN, 2008; CIHE, 2008; CBI, 2008) that have attempted to define and give shape to the concept of employability. There is remarkable consistency in their finding regardless of whether they are sponsored by employer organisations, government or educational institutions. They all consistently underscore the importance of “employability skills”, generically defined as “soft skills” and the importance of being “job ready”. These concepts and the assumptions that underlie them are explored in more detail below.

2.2 Concepts of Employability

The concept of employability is now firmly part of a global discourse on vocational skills. Amaral and Magalhães (2004) argue that it is part of a neo-liberal movement to decrease the social responsibility of the state by transferring that responsibility to individuals – essentially converting education from a public to private good. This is a significant departure from the precepts of the modern welfare state in Britain which firmly anchored the responsibility for sufficient employment opportunities with the State and espoused that work was a “right” of the individual in a free society (Beveridge, 1944). The dominance of employability within vocational education policy in England (as in other member states of the European Union) can be located in the accepted and unquestioned orthodoxy of human capital theories:

The evidence is clear that gaining new skills and qualifications can help people improve their lives in a number of ways – for example, better wages, improved employability, and progression to further learning (DIUS, 2007, p. 23).

These theories have underscored the importance of skill formation in maintaining global competitiveness and building strong and resilient local economies (Brown et al., 2001) even though some argue that the evidence fails to support the strength the human capital theory that more skills leads to greater returns for the individual and higher productivity for the employer (Wolf, 2002).

In England the whole architecture of further education is being reformed to respond to the Government’s unflinching focus on employability as the key driver for how further education is organised, funded and delivered (Leitch, 2006). These changes are being mirrored in higher education provision as well (Wächter, 2004) although the changes in that sector are perhaps not as extensive or pervasive. Notwithstanding the centrality of the employability concept in much of
educational policy, it is a concept that resists tight definition and has a range of uses and meanings (McQuaid, 2005). The meaning of “employability” is also a function of economic factors and Gazier (2006) notes that there have been significant changes in its meaning during the Twentieth Century.

In a seminal Government commissioned study on the concept of employability, the definition arrived at was: “employability is about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required” (Hillage and Pollard, 1998, p.1). That concept of employability is now firmly embedded in a range of policies that direct the operations of further education colleges in England (LSC, 2008). It is important to note that this commonly adopted definition of employability goes beyond just finding work but is also about the individual being able to sustain employment (Pool and Sewell, 2007).

In the context of the European Union that notion of “sustainable” employment has spawned a new buzzword – “flexicurity”. At a recent meeting of European leaders it was noted that:

There is growing interest in “flexicurity”. This can help people to manage employment transitions more successfully in times of accelerating economic change. By upgrading their skills, and protecting people rather than particular jobs, it helps people move into better paid, more satisfying jobs, or even start their own businesses (European Union, 2007).

The notion of flexicurity originated in the Netherlands but has quickly been adopted by the European Union as means of fusing together concepts of employment and social cohesion (Wilthagen and Tros, 2003).

Underpinning the various shifts in the meaning of “employability”, are neo-liberal currents that have brought about a shift in focus from “employment” to “employability”, or put another way, moving the emphasis on the supply of labour rather than the demand for it (Peck and Theodore, 2000). That is, it is the concern of the individual and not those managing the economy to find and maintain employment. Within the context of education, Moreau and Leathwood (2005) argue that “employability is constructed as primarily a matter of an individual’s skills” (p. 307) resulting in the rhetoric that the path to employability merely required further education colleges to deliver economically valuable skills. Peck and Theodore (2000) suggest that:

Employability-based approaches, which locate both the problems and the solutions in labour market policy on the supply side of the economy, are not sufficient to the task of tackling unemployment, social exclusion and economic inequality (p. 731).

They go on to argue that the unrelenting concentration on employability does not increase the stock of jobs but merely distorts the social distribution of work thereby raising the barriers even higher for those finding it difficult to enter the labour market.
The shift toward “employability” as a construct that relates exclusively to the individual has led to significant attention, particularly in higher education, to looking at how teaching and learning can be re-assembled to yield better employment outcomes for graduates. In this context, Yorke and Knight (2007) contend that employability is most usefully defined as a graduate’s suitability for appropriate employment. They reject the outcome-based notion that higher education should, necessarily, lead to employment as they argue that many other factors are at play in determining whether an individual gets a job such as the state of the economy and patterns of discrimination in the labour market. Accordingly, the employability task for higher education is to provide learners with “a complex set of learning achievements”, supported by systems that support the individual (including information, advice and guidance) and not specific curriculum content (Knight and Yorke, 2003, p.9).

Given the pull towards employability as a task for the individual, it is not surprising then to find a significant body of literature on the psycho-social dimensions of employability that leaves unquestioned the issues beyond the individual that impact on their employability. Fugate et al (2004) propose that:

An individual’s employability subsumes a host of person-centred constructs that combine synergistically to help workers effectively adapt to a myriad of work-related changes occurring in today’s economy. Employability is a psycho-social construct that embodies individual characteristics that foster adaptive cognition, behaviour, and enhance the individual-work interface (p.15).

Fugate et al (2004) suggest that employability has three essential components: career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital. Government policy statements take this further to suggest a lack of employability is an affliction to which you can apply a cure:

The main problems which such activities tackle include:

- Lack of basic skills
- Lack of key skills
- Lack of skills relevant to specific jobs and types of work
- Lack of confidence and poor social skills
- Lack of recent work experience
- Personal and behavioural problems including a history of mental illness or substance abuse
- A record of offending

Individuals may suffer from a number of these problems to some extent. This means that a package of actions will be required in order to achieve a significant improvement in employability (Department of Works and Pensions, 2008).

It is addressing these “deficits” we see employers demanding when referring to “employability” – typically under the banner of “soft skills” (Mayor of London, 2007). Increasingly, this notion of
employability has become common in the press as shorthand for defining personal success. A recent article in The Times highlights this popularisation of these ideas:

But are exam results really what counts in determining prospects? It’s an interesting area of science. More and more academic interest has focused recently on what are called non-cognitive skills such as resilience, self-discipline, patience and motivation in determining life outcomes (The Times, March 8, 2008, Supplement, p. 2).

The diagram below summarises the shifting locus of responsibility for employment identified in the literature. It shows a dual shift: responsibility for employment moving to the individual rather than the state and the skills required more biased towards “soft” skills rather than technical ones.

*Diagram 1: Changing Locus of Responsibility for Employability*

In examining the various concepts of employability, McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) offer a broad concept of employability that encompasses both demand and supply aspects:

(i) The extent of the individual’s transferable skills;

(ii) The level of personal motivation to seek work;

(iii) The extent of the individual’s ‘mobility’ in seeking work;

(iv) Access to information and support networks;
The extent and nature of personal barriers to work;

The attitude of employers towards the unemployed;

The supply and quality of training and education;

The availability of other assistance for disadvantaged job seekers;

The extent to which the tax-benefits system successfully eliminates benefit traps;

and

The supply of appropriate jobs in the local economy.

Even though employability is central to the mission of further education colleges, particularly in terms of the implications of government policy for practice, it is an area that remains largely under researched. In fact, further education colleges in England seem to attract little research interest “because of its historically Cinderella-like image, the sheer scale of further education can be overlooked” (Hodkinson and James, 2003, p. 391).

2.3 Implementing Employability Policies

The relationship between the State and further education colleges is an uneasy one marked by continually shifting agendas. Much of government policy around the promotion of employability in further education centres on describing the principles – such as “economically valuable skills”, “demand-led provision”, “embedded learning” but little attention is given to how these principles should be implemented and the dynamics of what necessitates the changes in the first place (DIUS, 2007; Coffield, 2008). The literature in this area is thin. A useful body of research comes from a review of vocational education in Sweden. Lindell (2006) has undertaken a detailed analysis of the process of reforming vocational education in Sweden over the last decade. Lindell draws heavily on the work of Lindensjö and Lundgren to develop an analytical model to describe the process of educational reform. Lindell (2006) argues that the problem of implementing political decisions can be divided into decision-making (the context of formulation) and executing and implementing those decisions (the context of realisation). These two activities are ruled by incompatible contingencies and as result reforms are not implemented as designed. They work independently of one another and use different sets of logic.

In terms of policy development, this typically occurs within limited resources, therefore, when a reform is designed it is at the expense of some related activities being shut-down or abandoned. This, in turn, triggers well organised interest groups – both those who support the reform and those
who oppose it because it threatens existing or planned activities – to mobilise. These stakeholders, who have played these games many times before, engage in formal and informal contacts with government and other decision makers to influence the process. The result is familiar patterns of disagreements that are reshaped and fashioned into a new consensus (Lindell, 2006).

Lundgren (2002) argues that the institutions tasked with formulating policy are no longer fit-for-purpose because they were constructed to handle the political economy of modern industrialised societies and are no longer suited to handle the complexities of a post-modern society and are incapable of mobilising support for action. Faced with new types of decisions within complex social environments, these organisations are no longer capable of acting rationally (Thompson & Alvesson, 2005). In response to this erosion of power there is increased emphasis on managerialism, inspections and quality assurance. This is clearly at play in the reform of FE in England:

The FE system reform programme includes the development of a balance scorecard of performance indicators know as the Framework for Excellence, which will provide a comprehensive performance management information system for the FE system. It will give learners and employers clear information about provider performance, and will support provider’s own improvement programmes (DIUS, 2007, p.48).

The result is two opposing dialectics: professional expertise versus political power and centralisation of decision-making versus local and decentralised governance (or subsidiarity). The diagram below illustrates the tensions drawn out in the literature. It shows a dual shift in power from central authority to more local decision-making and emphasis away from political power to the exercise of professional expertise to determine policy. However, in practice it is not as linear as presented here. The centre relinquishing direct power has been replaced by greater controls imposed through external inspections and other quality and funding compliance requirements. Similarly, the role of the “professional expert” is somewhat compromised by the politicisation of advice to fit with the political imperative (both depicted by the red lines). Accordingly, the espoused authority ceded to the locality and to professionals in reality is somewhat less and more constrained.
Diagram 2: Shifts in Locus of Power and Decision-making

Within the context of implementation, the focus is on administration and management issues. The rules of the “game” here are decided and shaped by local power structures and influences: “in this context, the decisions made at national level are perceived as shallow and somewhat coerced by necessity” (Lindell, 2006, p.225). The result is that individuals at a local level take such reforms at face value and conform them to existing or planned processes.

Lindell (2006) argues that the importance of local practitioners has increased because the state no longer has insight or control over what is happening in detail and professional are not affected by changes in political power meaning uninterrupted activity at a local level. To compensate for this apparent loss of power by the centre, more elaborate mechanisms of evaluation and monitoring have been introduced to ensure quality and outcomes improve. This has undermined the move toward decentralisation and taken away the flexibility required for development (Lundgren, 2002). Between these formal contexts are nested sets of intricate social mechanisms which turn open conflicts into negotiated consensus. Lindell (2006) argues that, apart from globalisation and the passage of time, “the essential ingredients maintaining this framework are mutual mindsets and collective trust” (p.237). It is the dynamics of national-local employability policy played out within further education colleges that is central to this study.

There is not a great deal that we know when it comes to the issues of implementing government policies in FE colleges in England and much of it is small scale (Simkins and Lumby, 2002) although the “Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education Project” has expanded the base of
knowledge in this area (Hodkinson et al., 2007). Gleeson and Knights (2008) comment “little is known about FE practitioners either as potential leaders or as those expected to implement changes in the sector” (p. 49). Some suggest that the lack of interest in the sector arises because its purpose is clear and not contested. Unlike schools and higher education where there have been clear debates about their role and purpose, further education does not attract the concerns of the middle classes and assign it the role as the Cinderella service (Gleeson et al, 2005); (Randle and Brady, 1997). It is, therefore, not surprising that government reviews are able to note with some confidence that further education colleges “should have as their primary purpose improving employability and supplying economically valuable skills” (Foster, 2005, p.5). There is also concern that most studies operate at a level of generalisation that masks the complexity of change within a college and implies the process is relatively homogenous across all environments. Understanding this complexity of individual cultures requires a look at not just managers and lecturers but support staff and learners. It also means looking beyond individuals to “the ways in which college restructuring and other developments are changing the pattern of political arenas within colleges and the relationships between them” (Simkins and Lumby, 2002, p. 18). Sitting within this are the values which underpin the purposes and processes of further education colleges and the shifting power of those trying influence these.

A major study undertaken by Hodkinson and James (2003) across a number of further education colleges in Britain illustrates the different ways in which further education colleges respond to these tensions. The research attempts to identify authentic experience within a learning context. They note that “for us, a key aspect of this authenticity is the complexity of the relationships between teachers, teaching, learners, learning, learning contexts and the wider contexts of learning” (p. 393). Their exploration of learning cultures follows along social constructivist lines where learning is considered inseparable from social practice. The research indicated significant variations between sites. They note that “the way in which sites achieved learner success varied significantly, as did some of the issues and problems they faced” (p. 400).

It follows that in responding to the aims of this study in developing an understanding of what happens within the culture of an FE college it is important to explore the dynamics of that culture. The next section on methodology looks at how the research was configured to draw out the issues raised by the research questions.
3. **Methods: Pathways to Understanding**

3.1 **Ethnographic Approach**

Even though this study is inductive it is influenced by the work of Maturana and Varela (1987) and the co-emergent perspective that looks at human behaviour as series of complex and interrelated systems:

If we want to co-exist with the other person, we must see his certainty – however undesirable it may seem to us - is as legitimate and valid as our own because, like our own, that certainty expresses his conservation of structural coupling in a domain of existence – however undesirable it may seem to us. Hence, the only possibility for coexistence is to opt for a broader perspective, a domain of existence in which both parties fit in bringing forth a common world (pp. 245-6).

Davis & Sumara (2001) suggest that a philosophy of co-emergence or co-evolution, as taken up in complex accounts, focuses on interrelations rather than separations...Co-specification occurs across anatomical, functional, and hierarchical levels” (p. 89). This has significant implications for assessing the way in which further education institutions “learn” and respond to policy signals – particularly around employability.

This has methodological implications as well. Rather than attempting to trace the translation of policy signals along various points of the “production” line in a mechanistic fashion, a co-emergent perspective requires a different and more organic approach. It demands a qualitative approach that attempts to make sense of experiences “rather than handing out prescriptions or getting caught up in deeply rutted discussions of power struggles, inequity, lack of direction...or loss of autonomy” (Davis & Sumara, 2001, p. 94). Quantitative data is problematic because complex systems are not static – they are alive and dynamic and so any attempt at quantification will only give a partial reading of the system.

Accordingly, in understanding the relationships between and within systems the study is based on an evidence base drawn from across the learning community within a further education college. These interviews provide opportunities to explore the nature, strength and dynamics of relationships within a college – the complex webs of communications, understanding and aspirations rather than a linear review of how goals and targets cascade down through the organisation. The extent to which that evidence conforms and amplifies government policy provides a means of assessing the quality of the relationship between the learning communities of a college with that of policymakers.
As Davis & Sumara (2001) suggest effective and robust systems are ones that are capable of harmonising disparate components rather than the homogenisation of individual experience:

What is useful here is the difference between linearity and nonlinearity—or Euclidean and fractal geometries. An education or a research project based on lines attempts to move from a start to a finish. An education or a research project structured around fractals unfolds through recursive elaborations, by which memories and previous knowledge and memory are continuously revised according to immediate experiences and emergent interpretive preferences (Davis & Sumara, 2005, p. 318).

The selection of a method to apply is not clear cut: “we are not faced with a fork in the road, with two well-defined alternative routes between which to choose. The research process is more like finding one’s way through a maze” (Hammersley, 1992, p. 184). As this study’s primary aim is to explore the nature and texture of relationships within a college environment to develop understandings of employability, it was important to apply a method that was capable of capturing the dynamic and complex aspects of that environment. Ethnography as a method comes closest to addressing that criteria as it is:

an approach to social research based on the first-hand experience of social action within a discrete location, in which the objective is to collect data which will convey the subjective reality of the lived experience of those who inhabit that location (Poole, 2003, p. 16).

Although as Hammersley (1998) suggests, “ethnography” refers to a broad collection of qualitative approaches and is, therefore, difficult to define with any great precision. It does not anchor itself in the bedrock of a particular paradigm or theoretical framework, nor does it propose a hypothesis that is tested empirically against the data collected:

Readers are not pointed down any one theoretical path or given the impression that truth might lie at the end of such a path. Readers will discover for themselves their own path and truth inside the case (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 238).

Ethnographic research (Hammersley, 1998; Pole, 2003) is typically characterised by:

- A focus on a discrete setting;
- A concern for the full range of social behaviour within that setting;
- The use of range of different research methods which may combine quantitative and qualitative approaches;
- An emphasis on data and analysis which moves from detailed description to the identification of concepts and theories which are grounded in data gathered from the setting.
An emphasis on the understanding the complexities of the setting rather than trying to identify overarching trends or generalisations

The benefit of ethnography is that it does not attempt to impose or emulate scientific methods designed to explore the physical world to the complex nature of human behaviour and relationships (Hammersley, 1998; Flyvbjerg, 2006). Accordingly, it does not apply a mechanistic paradigm which follows a set order. It is about understanding the complex weave of stories and experiences that construct the narrative of a place and the web of human interactions. To understand that complexity with any degree of specificity, like many decisions within the research process, a trade-off had to be made between breadth and depth. That is, whether to look at multiple cases in a general sense or one case with a degree of focus. The aims of the study were more likely to be satisfied through a more detailed and potentially more accurate case study of a single college (Hammersley, 1992).

3.2 Selecting the Case to Examine

This study is based on a case study of New Cross College, a further education college in inner South East London. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that the selection of the case study is fundamental to its value in the research process:

The value of the case study will depend on the validity claims that researchers can place on their study and the status these claims can obtain in dialogue with other validity claims in the discourse to which the study is a contribution. Like all good craftspeople, all researchers can do is use their experience and intuition to assess whether they believe a given case is interesting in a paradigmatic context and whether they can provide collectively acceptable reasons for the choice of the case (p. 233).

He states that a paradigmatic case are “cases that highlight more general characteristics of societies in question...It operates as a reference point and may function as a focus for founding of schools of thought” (p.232). New Cross College was chosen because it is considered by many commentators to be at the vanguard of taking forward the employability agenda. It is formally designated by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) as an “outstanding” 2 college. What makes New Cross interesting is that whilst it has all the “badges” of success it does so within an area of London that suffers from significant levels of poverty and unemployment. The unemployment rate in New Cross

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2 OFSTED carries out regular inspections of further education colleges and rates them on a scale from Grade 1 – “outstanding” through to Grade 4 – “inadequate”. See further: http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/portal/site/Internet/menuitem.455968b0530071c4828a0d8308c08a0c/?vgnextoid=2c8888535faac010VgnVCM1000003507640aRCRD
is 9% compared with 5.5% for England). With the decline in manufacturing over the last few decades, New Cross is not an obvious source of employment opportunities so the College is not located close to a number of significant employers that can provide clear pathways to employment. For those reasons, New Cross presented an interesting further education college to explore in the context of developing an understanding of employability.

3.3 Interviews and Artefacts

In undertaking this study, ‘conversations’ or interviews were arranged with individuals from across the College to determine the extent to which the experience differed across the community. As Pole (2003) comments “conversations are, of course, a major element in any kind of ethnographic field research. Conversations not only constitute an important source of data but might be regarded as a method of research in their own right” (p.163). Kvale (1996) states “interviews are well suited for studying people’s understanding of the meaning in their lived world, describing experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on the lived world” (p.105).

In preparation for these conversations, participants were sent an email providing a broad outline of the research.

In determining who to interview across the College, consideration was given to the various dimensions of the organisation to determine whether perspectives varied. Accordingly, the following combinations were chosen in an attempt to triangulate perspectives:

(a) senior management and junior administrative staff to establish whether the perspective of the senior leadership team was shared by support staff responsible for the administrative processes within the College;
(b) teaching staff and student support staff to ascertain whether the teaching and non-teaching contact with students was underpinned by a consistent discourse and approach;
(c) vocational, academic and basic skills teaching staff to establish any differences in the role of employability and its impact on pedagogy;
(d) advanced students and those with learning difficulties to test whether the student experience was common providing pathways into work and further study.

Interviews were typically for about one hour and conducted on site. They were digitally recorded with permission obtained from the participant at the commencement of the interview and transcribed afterwards. The interviews were semi-structured (Kvale, 1996) around four key areas: the mission and purpose of the college; notions of employability; the influence of government policy and the relationship of the college to the broader community. The questions provided a loose framework to prompt discussion and questions were modified during interviews to explore specific issues raised by participants. This was done to ensure that the world was seen from the perspective of the person being interviewed rather than the preconceptions and prejudices of the researcher.
The interview questions are set out in the Research Biography (page 58). To support, elucidate and test the data collected in the interviews, observations of the college environment were carried out including senior management meetings and teaching and learning across several of the College’s vocational areas.

In addition to interviews and observations, some of the artefacts of the College were reviewed; such as papers and minutes of the governing body, strategic plans, promotional literature and videos and external inspection reports.

3.4 Analysis: Employing a Metaphor
The data was analysed by reviewing the interviews and other materials to construct a narrative. As Kvale (1996) puts it “the analysis may also be a condensation or reconstruction of the many tales told by the different subjects into a richer, more condensed and coherent story” (p.199). In this respect it was necessary to construct rather than simply apply an existing narrative that spoke directly to the aims of this study of understanding how the employability discourse manifested itself in the practices of the college. The interview data and other materials were reviewed to identify themes, inconsistencies and the values and beliefs that underpinned the stories told. Therefore, in telling that story of the College and making sense of what was going on within this environment it was helpful to employ a device for structuring that narrative.

To that end, the analysis included a preliminary stage of identifying a metaphor that provided coherence and means for organising, analysing and understanding what to privilege in constructing the narrative. Aita et al (2003) point to the power of metaphors as an analytical tool:

Metaphors were vital and generative in their ability to provide us with continually fresh insights, like little treasure chests that we unlocked again and again to extract valuable content and meaning. Eventually we became aware that these metaphors were the keys to understanding much more than the structure and function of practices. The metaphors we identified encapsulated a vast amount of information in one concept (p. 1421).

The analysis of the data uncovered that the metaphor of an extended family was consistent with the themes, symbols and language emerging from the data.

The extended family provides a powerful metaphor for understanding the dynamics operating within the College. Dexter and LaMagdeleine (2002) argue that “a conceptual metaphor as a heuristic device can serve a powerful tool in refinement of the issue being investigated and its analysis” (p. 363). In considering appropriate metaphors to describe the College a number were considered but they lacked a completeness about them – they told some of the story but not all of it. What was striking was that many of the networks and relationships at the College operated in some respects
like a family — as Dexter and LaMagdeleine suggest “the right metaphor can provide an indicative moment – an “ah ha” – that suddenly illuminates a puzzle by pointing to something familiar yet evocative” (p. 369). And I put the proposition to the Principal who commented:

I was going to say that I probably couldn't have done this had I not become a parent at a late age. So I talk about parenting not mothering or fathering. Parenting is about leading toward independence. The child becomes the whole person. So I think the extended family is a good metaphor for that.

The extended family metaphor did unlock parts of the puzzle. An extended family conveys the strong and diverse intergenerational relationships that enable individuals to locate themselves, form alliances and gather the support required to promote their development.

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3 Interview, Principal, 19 May, 2008.
4. The Extended Family: New Cross College

4.1  The Family History

4.1.1  Introduction

Why an “extended family”? Families “are the ‘glue’ that ensure social stability, personal security and continuity of the social order” (Biggs, 2007, p. 705). Families, as with many social groupings, have a head – someone who leads, they have rituals, values and beliefs that set the boundaries of behaviour, they have artefacts, they have a sense of place – the family home, they nurture and have an identity both in the collective and the individual, they have a history – shared stories and legends, and they share a language or a discourse that enables them to give expression within that grouping. They also have boundaries although through marriage these are permeable and expand and contract each time re-defining and re-purposing the family. The evidence was everywhere I looked: the supportive and genuine nature of the people at the College, the fact that the Principal personally buys all the clocks for each room from Heal’s⁴, the fact that the place is decorated like a home rather than an institution and the enduring relationships between staff and learners well after courses have finished.

This is no ordinary family. It is the story of a family that has made its way back from the brink of failing fortunes and deep unrest. In its early days the College was faced with massive financial cuts that led to significant staff redundancies. It is not surprising then making sure the College is financial secure has been a clear objective for the Principal. As she notes “there was no dowry, such as valuable real estate, to smooth the path of change” (CD, 2004, p.1). This was a state of affairs that clearly no one wanted to return to. The Principal has been very successful in growing the income of the College and she now has a dowry. The mutuality of goals of making this a well decorated ‘home’ but also a self-sufficient one is evidenced by an impressive and valuable collection of artworks the College has amassed: it not only improves the aesthetics of the environment but is also a resource that can be cashed in if the circumstances ever required it.

New Cross College is an interesting place. Its origins, as with other further education colleges in London, can be found in the Mechanics Institutes of the Nineteenth Century which were established by the Victorians to provide opportunities for the development of the working class

⁴ Heals is a fashionable and expensive furniture and homewares store in London (http://www.heals.co.uk/)
– to equip them with the necessary skills to keep the factories running and to promote self-improvement. Some things have not changed; the drivers behind further education in England can readily be traced back to these antecedents. Leafing through the pages of the family photo album of New Cross College there are pictures of well-maintained classrooms, learners in starched uniforms in the kitchens or engineers looking uncomfortable in suits working with what now looks like primitive technology. The College in its current form began in 1990 when it was considered the worst further education in Inner London. The Principal (who has been at there for 17 years) describes the College back then:

New Cross College had no shared sense of the kind of institution it wanted to be. The College was riven by internal competition, often of the crudest kind. Several technical departments vied with each other to offer identical qualifications. At odds with all of the technical barons, a lone department provided all those below Level 2\(^5\). This learning ghetto was physically disconnected from the main college and practitioners fought to get their learners into the mainstream. Once there learners were expected to sink or swim (CD, 2004).

4.1.2 Facts and Figures

The College has come a long way from those uncertain and difficult beginnings. It is now rated as an outstanding college by OFSTED and is a double Beacon College\(^6\). It is considered by some as possibly the most successful further education college in England. The College’s latest Inspection Report states: “New Cross is an outstanding college. It contributes significantly to the regeneration of East London and successfully encourages learners to develop positive attitudes to learning and employment” (OFSTED, 2006). It operates on two campuses located in South East London in an area that it is noted for significant areas of deprivation. It has 13,600 learners

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\(^5\) Qualification levels are determined by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in accordance with the National Qualifications Framework. Details of the Framework are set out in Appendix 1.

\(^6\) Learning and Skills Beacon status provides public recognition of the excellence and innovation which exists within the further education system. This prestigious award celebrates learning providers that deliver outstanding teaching and learning. Excellent leadership and management is also a defining feature of all Beacons. It is for providers funded by the Learning and Skills Council and inspected by the Office for Standards in education (OFSTED).

The thinking at the heart of Beacon status is to drive up standards of provision in a fresh and innovative way. Launched by the Department for Education and Skills (DFES) in 2002. Beacon status is now managed by QIA.

Beacon status has been awarded to a wide range of colleges and other training providers, representative of the real breath and diversity of the further education system in England. Retrieved 1 June from [http://www.beaconstatus.org/opencms/opencms/www2/about/](http://www.beaconstatus.org/opencms/opencms/www2/about/)

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of which 2,587 are aged 16-19, 70% are part-time and 30% are full-time. The College offers 637 courses, has 598 staff and has an annual budget of £34 million. Significantly, 76% of learners are studying at Level 2 or below. A continuing trend for the College is that “learners are younger and less well qualified with low prior attainment” (OFSTED, 2006, p.8). As the Principal notes in the past:

They came in with the skills and experience that lecturers expected of them to have and were prepared to go straight into Level 2. They could deal with fairly traditional delivery methods, manage their own learning and understand for themselves how they were progressing...The dominant assumption was that learners had to adapt themselves to make the best of what was provided. It was a benign, if unthinking assumption. Staff would do what they did best – relay the skills and knowledge they had acquired, probably in the way they had acquired them. But there were some behaviours that were less than benign – they were insensitive, disrespectful, very occasionally abusive. And these behaviours went largely unknown – and unchallenged – in a culture that assumed that professionals should be left alone to do what they did best. This was particularly true when most interaction was behind closed classroom doors and no one thought to ask learners about their experience (CD, 2004, pp.5-6).

Today the College does a considerable amount to use the learner experience to inform everything it does. A significant feature of the College is its diversity and capacity to deal with individual difference. Unlike in the past, the College population now more accurately reflects its local communities. As the Vice Principal told me:

The main thing is that people can achieve at all levels. Different learning styles come down to the skills of the lecturer, particularly through initial assessment. We have people working with learners on structures to achieve, to support them. Anything from several hours to fifteen hours per week. Culture is a difficulty for us – a lot of issues around race, culture, homophobia, sexism etc. We don’t accept it, we put it on the agenda7.

This is also reflected in the Colleges current mission: “To see ambitions of all our communities achieved in pursuit of wider participation in economic success and advancement and, with these, the social and cultural enrichment of all parts of our region” (CD, 2007, p. 5).

4.1.3 Thinking through Generations
The College’s journey to its current success has been a long one. The College’s development is marked by four distinct phases, reflected in successive strategic plans:

Constructing Capability 1993 to 1998 (developing the internal capacity)
Promising Prospects 1997 to 2002 (learning fit for the 21st Century)
Pushing Prosperity 2003 to 2006 (fitness for future agenda)
Achieving Ambitions 2007 to 2012 (a focus on learners and the outside world)

7 Interview, Vice Principal, 7 April, 2008.
The Principal explains the generations of plans which have served as road maps for the College:

Achieving ambitions like all the strategic plans tell to the world, but particularly the world inside the College, the story of what we are going to become. So it’s the only strategic plan in the world with no numbers in it. It’s my tales of times ahead in order to build a framework for thinking and a set of permissions in the organisation for exploration. So, strategic intentions always do that. So that’s the first thing. The second thing is if you look at the titles “constructing capability”, “promising prospects”, “pushing prosperity”, “achieving ambitions” and the next one 2012-2015 is called “delivering destinations” and that’s a product lifecycle or a story of a growing up-ness in the same way that a child goes from toddlerhood to school child to adolescent to worker - it is the same thing so the titles parallel a person going into the world: constructing capability (primary school), promising prospects (secondary school), pushing prosperity (connecting to society) and achieving ambitions (connected to a wider world) so it’s the generation game of any college but this college in particular.

And “delivering destinations” - it that “generativity” in the Erikson\(^8\) sense?

Yes it must be. It’s saying “not only will we enable you to achieve ambitions, we'll move it to where you want to take your ambition to give something back. Because where you work is giving something back - so the destination university or work or another course so I will work that end of the world to come towards you. And the strap line for that and I don’t quite yet know what I mean by it but I will work at it is "spreading self belief". All of them had a strap line: "force for change", "more than a college", "side by side", "specialising in success" and "spreading self-belief" and it is something about the notion of Erikson - he talks in one of the earlier phases about how you can only be part of a group when you know who you are as a person. Because you can give a bit and take a bit so relationship building comes from having a sense of self. And people who have no sense of self have problems with that or when your sense of self is bruised in some way and you are less confident socially\(^9\).

The Principal goes on to explain her three tests for setting the direction and priorities for the College – it must be fit for purpose, fit for context and fit for phase. These serve as important markers in the College’s development. The College’s development trajectory demonstrates its capacity to internalise and apply the tenets of government policy – particularly in bringing a focus to the employability agenda. In responding to the research questions what follows is an analysis of the dynamic processes at play within the College.

4.2 How the Family Operates
The College exhibits the characteristics of what Wenger (1998) refers to as a “community of practice”. Communities of practice are social groups to which individuals belong – families, workplaces, local groups and they are part of the fabric of our daily lives. They are bound together

\(^8\)Erik Erikson in *Childhood and Society* (1963) proposed that individuals move through eight stages of development with “generativity” in adult life that stage where one makes a contribution to the community.

\(^9\)Interview, Principal, 19 May, 2008.
by their ‘work’ and they interact with one another to do it better. It is the process of this social interaction that learning takes place and meaning is constructed. Wenger (2000) provides a useful explanation:

Whether we are apprentices or pioneers, newcomers or oldtimers, knowing always involves these two components: the competence that our communities have established over time (ie what it takes to act and be a recognized as a competent member), and our ongoing experience of the world as a member of it (in the context of a given community and beyond) (p. 227).

The family of the College can therefore be viewed as a community of practice and within that are nested smaller communities of practice. And like a family it combines personal transformation with the evolution of networks and social structures. This is not necessarily a gentle or passive process because it is in the dynamic interplay between social competence and personal experience that learning occurs (Wenger, 2000). As many of us have experienced, belonging and participating in a family brings its joys but also conflicts, negotiations and disagreements as we find our place and form our identity – not in a vacuum – but in relation to others. ‘Work’ is what binds this College together as a community of practice – it is central to their language, their values and in the way they relate to one another.

4.2.1 A Language of Work
What is clear about the College is that there is a discourse of work and purpose that runs through everything. It starts with the strap lines within the College’s strategic documents and can be traced through conversations with staff and learners. The Principal talks about the importance of memes in transmitting values throughout the College:

A ‘meme’ is to culture as genes are to bodies. A meme once it’s out can’t be controlled - it’s from the Selfish Gene book. A meme changes culture - they sound like slogans but they are not. “More than a college” - people knew they could do more than ordinary things there so things set up permissions running through the college.10

This language helps give a shared meaning to what the College does and how it defines itself. As an administrative officer at the College said to me:

The term that we always use at the college is “more than this”. In every area we try to go more than – we are not just looking at giving the student qualifications we are looking at getting them into a job. Nobody studies just to get a piece of paper but you are selling them the dream of where they can go onto.11

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10 Interview, Principal, 19 May, 2008.

11 Interview, Administrative Officer, 2 April, 2008.
The Vice Principal reflects the same language “first of all you get them to dare to dream, to be ambitious and then give them the confidence to achieve those ambitions”\textsuperscript{12}. And that “more than” concept is reflected in what the learners say: “doing a lot stuff since I started here. I do more than mine course which is health and social care. So it broadens my prospects”\textsuperscript{13}. Even for learners that are a bit more cautious in their outlook connect with this language of “achieving ambitions” noting that “not yet. Still working on it. Helping me get there”\textsuperscript{14}.

These concepts are also reflected in the way that the College is organised and how that structure is communicated. Rather than a traditional organisational chart the College calls is structure “the dahlia” (see below) and as the Principal explained each year the flower changes with a petal falling off or a new shoot emerging reflecting the dynamic nature of organisation. This is what Wenger (1998) calls reification – the cultural artefacts and symbols in which meaning is manifest and this plays an important process in capturing the discourse of the College. This organisational chart is widely understood across the College as a symbol about how it is organised around the needs of the learner to ensure there are pathways to work and further study. Unlike a traditional organisational chart a “flower” captures the sense of something living and adaptable so in subtle ways it conveys the organisation as one that is subject to constant renewal and growth.

\textsuperscript{12} Interview, Vice Principal, 7 April, 2008.

\textsuperscript{13} Student Focus Group, 2 May, 2008.

\textsuperscript{14} ibid
4.2.2 Family Values

Underpinning the language of work is a clear set of values and shared beliefs. What is important about these values is that there is coherence about them – they are related and mutually reinforcing. Like the values within an extended family, they have an internal logic, local variations, and spring from the experiences. They are a recognisable characteristic that marks out one family from another. Discussions with staff and students highlighted how and widely accepted these values are across the College community. As with any values and beliefs they are inextricably linked with an individual’s identity (Wenger, 1998).
Mutuality and Respect
The Principal outlines her own roots and how they have contributed to setting the tone of the College:

I grew up with unemployment and, I grew up in a mining village, I saw people be damaged by work but I also saw the camaraderie of work. Karl Marx talks about work and love and how they define people. I taught coalminers literature and I would say what are you doing this for and they would say it is really great to recite Robbie Burns in the pits - so being educated in Scotland is kind of classless - you could have no backside in your trousers but if you were wise, if you knew things and had some education, you were respected - people would come and ask your advice - so there is a whole different take on being skilled - clever with their hands - clever with their experience - I have always had an enormous respect for cleverness - fear of unemployment - a couple of abiding principles in the college - people should live their lives through choice not fate. Breaking down serfdom: emancipation via skills acquisition. There is something about Scottish Society and I have watched the Church of Scotland wrap around its parishioners and one elder looks after four families and they will wash the dead make tea for the births - they do what needs to be done rather than impose a model of what should be done and sitting by the side of elders is a nice thing to do. They did good things with generosity so one of the principles I hold dearly at New Cross is generosity. Mutuality and generosity are key values.

That “mutuality” is around a social contract between the learner and the College. The Principal in an early (1995) College video comments:

If you are prepared to invest blood, sweat and tears in your future, we are very willing to match that. We will match that by putting before you excellent resources, very skilled staff – up to the minute – very good links with employers and universities. Means when you start here you go onto other places which give you further opportunities.

These values are evident throughout the College – whether it is the way you are greeted by the security guards at the front reception desk, the way in which teaching staff relate to learners or the way in which College partners talk about the College. Cybil a women in her eighties who has had a very long affiliation with College summed it up in her opening prayer to the College’s Annual Governors’ Fundraising Dinner: “Father God help us to become who we need to be”\textsuperscript{16}. There is a clear moral purpose here which can be located in the texture of relationships. Mutuality and respect are reinforced in many ways. The Principal explains:

I will say “hey language” - the call it me doing Principal rounds. Going around asserting standards not making a big deal of it saying “hey don't should we have exams going on and when you have exams I'll stop the corridor for you” - that whole bit around relatedness and responsibility, not lectured at but a constant gentle reminder of a decorum - and that's something for me about getting people to take up their role in learning. So I say if you step

\textsuperscript{15} Interview, Principal, 19 May, 2008.

\textsuperscript{16} College Fundraising Dinner, 12 March, 2008.
over the line forget your street cleverness here you are a learner. It’s an understanding of role, an understanding of task, how you build a culture - a complaint is a badly expressed desire - don’t do that - everyone does it now - I say to staff you can’t walk past something that is not right how are they going to learn\textsuperscript{17}.

Part of that mutuality and respect is anchored in the setting of boundaries – the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in this family and how behaviour of one member impinges on that of another.

**Inclusivity**
There is also a strong ethic of inclusion at the College. The Head of Teacher Training notes that the College has a policy of not turning people away particularly if they are employees. For those individuals they develop bespoke packages of support to respond to specific issues. Practice is continually refined and changed each year to ensure that the principles of inclusion are embedded in practice. He also indicated that they were encouraged to experiment as part of the ethos of the College that if something does not work it was important to change it\textsuperscript{18}.

What is relevant here is inclusion is not just a matter of providing equal access to opportunities and leaving individuals to make their own way to succeed or not. Practices change to find new ways to enable individuals to succeed. College staff recognise that this is an iterative process and the extent to which individual differences are catered for is difficult to measure without referencing it back to the experience of the individual.

**Supportive**
Strong support of learners outside of the classroom is a key factor to learners’ success at the College. It has long been part of the ethos of the College. The Principal states in a promotional video produced for the College in 1995:

> The most important thing is that you are never alone as a learner at the College. We pride ourselves in not being a ‘sink or swim’ place. If you need information, guidance and support it is here for you, and it is here for you in abundance. We are committed to providing extensive support for learners. Success depends not just on learning in the classroom but having somewhere to go to talk over issues, the other issues that impinge on learning.

This is consistent with Vygotsky’s sociocultural perspective of education that emphasised the affect and intellect as interlinked:

\textsuperscript{17} Interview, Principal, 19 May, 2008.

\textsuperscript{18} Interview, Head of Teacher Training, 1 May, 2008.
emotions play an important role not only in the process of students’ learning, but also in the process of teaching. Teacher must show their students that the reason they teach is not simply because they have valuable information to share with their students, but, more important, because they care about their students’ present and future well-being and overall development. Vygotsky maintained that as a result of such a caring process of teaching, students not only develop trust toward their teachers, but also develop interest, appreciation, and even love of the subject matter taught “ (Levykh, 2008, pp. 91-92).

The support is also provided at peer level through the College’s study buddy scheme. The scheme involves students who have completed a course and continue on to study at the college, to assist new students who enrol in the course they have just completed. This includes having weekly study sessions or helping new students with any problems they have on the course or at College as a whole. It is confidential and helps to improve retention rates whilst giving the new students a firm grasp of the course and making them feel as though they belong at the college. Mayes and Crossan (2007) argue that an important mechanism to promote student learning is to provide them with access to experiences of other learners applying Wenger’s concept of “horizontal learning” (Wenger, 2005).

The College also provides advice and guidance to learners after they have left under GURU – which is shorthand for “advice and guidance until you no longer need it”. This is a useful mechanism to ensure that individuals get the support they need to make the transition into higher education or employment.

Hodkinson (2005) makes some interesting observations about this transition:

What moves from the college to the workplace is not the learning, but the learner. We need to stop seeing the learner as a vessel, but as a holistic person who has learned (or not) whilst at college and will learn (or not) whilst at work. The result of college education is to change the learner, though not always in the ways those planning the learning expect. The experience of participating in college contributes to this change, which can be slight or great. Learners may become more knowledgeable or more skilled. They may also become more or less self-confident. Learning is a social and embodied process, involving emotions, practical actions and identity (p. 527).

In looking at government policy it is evident that part of the divide between policy and practice that Lindell (2006) refers to is a function of inadequate regard being given to providing learners with the support they need. This is somewhat ironic given the persistent rhetoric around the development of “soft skills”.

**Rules with Consequences**

There is an expectation at the College that continued membership requires adherence to the rules which are well articulated and understood across the College community. Breaking the rules has
clear consequences and puts at risk a learner’s tenure at the College. These rules are not just about maintaining order within the College but an important part of the socialisation process to arm learners with the discipline or “soft skills” expected of them in the work place. The Head of Hospitality and Catering explains:

I will tell you a story – I was at 15 [a London restaurant] the other day and Jamie has a rule: “turn up, shut up and get on with it” and they are the golden rules of work really. I thought that was quite clever – knowing that you have to get on with it. There isn’t time to have a chat to explain why every time. If I ask you to do something I expect “yes chef”. Getting that over to people that because of the nature of the industry people aren’t going to stop and explain and talk at that particular time. There are times when they have to learn to get on with it. Having respect for other people and that is something we concentrate on within my school. Understand that you are working as part of that team and you may not always like the person but you have to respect the job they are doing. Respect authority because that is the way the industry is and turning up on time. I think it is because of what we do – we do run two restaurants and a coffee shop it makes it real for them – they get those employability skills naturally occurring in what we do.

This is linked to a strong ethic around individual responsibility as one student notes:

Your personality makes you employable. But I don't know how the College can make your personality different. It can make your grow, it can make you change but it all depends on the person themselves. If they actually want the job - you can tell - by the way they act if they want it.

This is consistent with the conception of employability put forward by Fugate et al (2004) which conceives it as function of a personal inventory (what the development psychologists call the Big Five Traits) rather than anything to do with opportunities in the economy. This is also consistent with national policy:

All learning is to be valued. But first and foremost we must support people to take responsibility for their own skill development, to gain economically valuable skills. Each one of us has the personal responsibility for achieving our potential and our ability to contribute, taking the opportunities available to make the most of our own lives...it is ‘in our hands’ (DIUS, 2007, p. 35).

A similar point is made by a careers officer:

Every member of staff from the caretakers to cleaners to the canteen staff, us, the library staff, should be setting an example of what it is like to be in work - for us it is coming to work on time leaving on time being that sort of role model and being brave enough to challenge a learners behaviour - their timekeeping and commitment because they will have to take that on further once they leave us here so part of education here should be to install those structures they are going to need once they move into the world of work. If I was

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19 Jamie Oliver is a celebrity chef in Britain.

20 Interview, Head of Hospitality and Catering, 7 April, 2008.

21 Student Focus Group, 2 May, 2008.
continually late I am sure I would be getting written warning and soon be sacked so we have to give that sort discipline in a good way we don’t have to have a big stick but we all have to be role models and behaving in that way so it’s a holistic approach that we take.\textsuperscript{22}

The same ‘consequences’ apply to staff and they are expected to comply with rules again on the basis of supporting the employability of the learners. The Vice Principal made the comment that those that could not adapt their teaching methodology moved on whereas as others that adapted their methods found reward in the work.\textsuperscript{23} As Wenger (1998) notes membership of a community of practice does not remain open to everyone particularly if they fail to adopt its accepted practices and norms.

4.2.3 Creating Self-belief

In helping learners as members of the family to become independent and move into employment or higher education, a lot of what the College does is creating self-belief or transforming individuals through skills development. There are many of examples of this throughout the College and it is this thread that runs through many activities. As one of the careers advisers explained:

If you take the basic skills college the ambition might be to pass literacy level 1 and we have people who work through the door that have had such a terrible experience of education and they get to middle life and say they can’t bear to not be able to fill out forms on their own. For them it’s a big deal to come in so for them their ambition is quite humble but if you think about the impact it has on their children and their grandchildren it is really worthwhile. We had another girl who came in and her ambition was to get to Oxford we helped all the way and she got in, we helped with the interview expenses to Oxford and it all paid off. We get people who want to start their own businesses we try and help with the Princes’ Trust - so it depends on what they want to do - it’s an empowering thing to get them to help themselves. Where there is a gap sometimes is that they think we are going to do it for them but that is not our role. Because they have to be able to do it for themselves throughout their lives.\textsuperscript{24}

It is a difficult process, particularly given the ‘damage’ that individuals face in the earlier encounters with education along with their belief their capacity to learn. When asked about how people outside the College perceive it, one student commented “this is where the waste comes”. She went onto

\textsuperscript{22} Interview, Careers Adviser, 1 May, 2008.

\textsuperscript{23} Interview, Vice Principal, 7 April, 2008.

\textsuperscript{24} Interview, Careers Adviser, 1 May, 2008.

\textsuperscript{25} Student Focus Group, 2 May, 2008.
explain that those who could achieve would stay in school or go to a sixth form college. The Vice Principal gives his perspective on what happens in schools:

The message they have is what they can’t do in life not what they can do in life. And if it was true they would have no future. But I don’t believe that – I don’t think anybody does. But for some reason the education system has graded them on what they can’t do. It is interesting when we go and interview learners at 16 schools tell me how many GCSEs they did or didn’t have – may be 2-3 at Grade D or E, but what else does it tell me of this 11 years they have had? It doesn’t tell me anything. It doesn’t tell me if they are literate or numerate, it doesn’t tell me what interpersonal skills they have or anything. Not being valued. So the trick straight away is to value the skills they have rather than immediately trying to reinforce the skills they don’t have. That’s where we work well. A lot is down around personal development, self-esteem, getting the young person to take responsibility for who they are but also daring them to dream, rather than examinations, hurdles and barriers – because once you dream of what you want to be you begin to acquire the skills and qualifications but if you have been terrified to dream it doesn’t happen.26

I put this point to the Principal and she immediately recognised the perception and connected with the perception of FE as the “Cinderella” service. She noted that she had worked hard to “surprise the soul” of those coming into the College and the skills agenda provided FE with the opportunity to become “something more than where the waste comes”27. Interestingly, whilst learners see the College as “where the waste comes” before they arrive they no longer hold that perception once they progress through the environment – they merely note it as an external perception. It does, however, convey quite powerfully how learners coming into the College construct their identities as learners and more generally as members of community. Accordingly, the family of the College provides a ‘safe’ place to re-form their identities through experiencing success.

One of the greatest challenges with creating self belief to balance the support with the development of autonomy. There is a danger that in people “returning to the family” a sense of dependency is created. This has been a difficult balance to get right. The Principal explained how this had been an issue in the past there was a time when there were terrible arguments around the edges of the college. The management team looked at the incident reports at the end of each day and the Principal started to seek out all those involved in a perimeter dispute. In talking to the learners she found that “it was about the pain of going home”28. From being at the College and being safe in a clean environment and getting a bit of respect and then going back out there was too much for them. The Principal realised that the College was building an unreal world for them and breeding

26 Interview, Vice Principal, 7 April, 2008.

27 Interview, Principal, 19 May, 2008.

28 ibid
dependency. As a result, the College had to be more careful about doing less for learners: “it is like being a parent you tie their shoes until they can tie them for themselves and then you stop. You know the time when to let go. We were creating a dependency that didn’t help with progression when they left us”\(^\text{29}\).

The changing structure of society and the relationship with employers has had an impact on the changing profile and perception of further education in England. The Principal notes:

The College was bastion of white young men coming through the door on day release from employers and so any problems with a student you would phone the employer and they would get their wages docked. There are none of those cheap and easy controls and connecting bits. So we have to find another set of relationships. Actually with needy people, disadvantaged people nourishment is what it is all about but not nourishment that breeds a dependency but breeds an autonomy. And of course they feel it for themselves when they come in for whatever has gone on in their background - it’s what they say at the end that interests me as well. So let them come in with whatever label but it is how they leave, their sense of progress and achievement that matters to me. My challenge has been to develop ladders down not up. I see it as a corridor between worlds. So I have been building ladders down so that folk can get in and we will do what we can with them. Just as others are building ladders and doorways out - so we are portals really\(^\text{30}\).

There is a very practical dimension to this work around providing structure for learners as the Head of Hospitality explains:

It is a big learning curve for them and for me it’s a journey when they are here from being dysfunctional people sometimes to those that want to be terrific chefs – it doesn’t happen overnight. But we have very strict guidelines and we stick to it. Like you have to be on time. Those with childcare can negotiate with their tutors up to 15mins but that’s it. Dress code is adhered to right from the word go. We have people to support them but in reality if they are not the sort of people that can turn up on time then this is the wrong job for them. So we would try and help them find something more suitable for them because there is no point as it is such a time driven industry. It is fairly rare that this happens because we have a journey plan to get people ready for work. There’s a lot of peer pressure as well. So if you are working in a kitchen you are a part of team and you’re 10 mins late someone has to carry you. We keep the groups together as much as we can through the programme so that they get interdependent with each other and they realize they are not individuals but part of team and that’s part of that learning curve. Towards the end of the programme people do get quite upset if they are late because they realise they are letting their colleagues down\(^\text{31}\).

Forming communities of practice are an important feature of the dynamics of the College. These communities are bounded by the values of the College and they provide a common set of standards,

\(^{29}\) ibid

\(^{30}\) ibid

\(^{31}\) Interview, Head of Catering and Hospitality, 7 April, 2008.
symbols and practices across these groups. It is not only structure that is important but developing resilience and an identity through social processes such as those described above. Wenger (2005) refers to this as “boundary crossing” as individuals move from one culture to another. He notes that in moving across these boundaries, new social spaces, the identity that an individual constructs in a previous community of practice is tested — that certain self that has been constructed no longer works — and so you have to transform and adapt. He suggests that the process of globalisation has destabilised those things that make us feel part of a community — those identifiers have become more diverse and transient making the task of belonging and “fitting in” much harder. The Vice Principal suggested that “Often the mistake has been in order to be successful you have to give up your culture, your identity – you don’t. Have to build on it”32 — underscoring Wenger’s point that whilst you may not have to give up who you are — you do in fact have to adapt your identity.

4.2.4 Learning from each Other
It is well understood at the College that the learner is at the centre of how the place works. As one student told me: it is “easy to get what you want if you open your mouth”33. As an administrative officer explained there is genuine reciprocity between learners and staff in shaping how the College operates. The College has a large student forum and student governors are very active and it results in aspects of the College being constantly changed. He commented that the “Principal has said for a long time “for those who have little surround them by splendour” and that’s what the College seems to do”34.

The College has a sculpture that the Principal pointed out to me that conveys this attitude towards the learner in a strongly symbolic way: it is of a lion bowing its head forward and a cub playfully arched over it exploring its head. The Principal explains it as the great powerful lion (the institution of the College) bowing before its young (the learner) in the service of its learning35. This concept of learning from the learner is not adequately captured in Wenger’s account of communities of practice. Fuller et al (2005) suggest that Wenger’s view of legitimate peripheral participation as “catching up” is an incomplete concept because “experienced workers are also learning through their engagement with novices” (p.64). This is evident in the reverse mentors at the College that an administration officer explains that the reverse mentoring is a kind of student equivalent of

32 Interview, Vice Principal, 7 April, 2008.
33 Student Focus Group, 2 May, 2008.
34 Interview, Administrative Officer, 2 April, 2008.
35 Interview, Principal, 19 May, 2008.
'managing up' within the College. The Research Action Project involves students meeting on a regular basis to address key problems they see within the College. Essentially, unlike the student forum or most student feedback sessions, the students debate something they see as being a problem and commission, amongst themselves, a research project to find a way of addressing it with an outlook to finding a solution. This was begun in the college by the Grub Institute\(^{36}\) who have had a great deal of success in schools. One of the major successes of this approach is that students have a vested interest in implementing change; student buy-in is increased as they want their solutions to work\(^{37}\).

The College takes great pride in its learners. At the Governors’ Annual Fundraising Dinner the learners were involved in all aspects of the evening from greeting guests, preparing the meal and serving the guests. All the money raised from the dinner went to the learners’ hardship fund as do the stipends the Principal receives for sitting on various national committees. This again underlines the strong family ethic at work within the College.

4.2.5  **It is all about work...building resilience**

The learners are aware of the realities beyond the boundaries of the College and are acutely aware that the scaffolding that supports their learning (Vygotsky, 1978) will no longer be there. Whilst they recognise that the College imposes certain discipline they know that the experience in work is unlikely to resemble the support they have here:

> It’s hard. You are on your own. The manager has rules and if you don’t follow the rules you get sacked. College is more lenient. You are completely independent and responsible for your actions. More consequences for doing what you are supposed to do. Work you have someone pushing you that it: “do that, do that”. Here they give you the option but it’s your responsibility as a learner\(^{38}\).

Work and its centrality to social experience is evident throughout the College. This is what Wenger (1998) refers to as participation which is not just about the process of taking part in the life of the community but also the relations with others that are reflected in that process: “it suggests both action and connection” (p.55). This is a key aspect how the employability agenda is lived out in the College. It is not about a uniform approach to work and differences exist across the College:

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\(^{36}\) The Grub Institute is a charity that works with young people in South East London.

\(^{37}\) Interview, Administrative Officer, 2 April, 2008.

\(^{38}\) Student Focus Group, 2 May, 2008.
You will find a different culture between cultural industries or business. Even within cultural industries the dancers are all terribly disciplined. They all turn up at 9am and audition for things and get heartbroken and floods of tears. The media learners operate very much their own steam. They'll go off and come back and half the time we don't quite know where they are. That's not quite true but there seen as more as working with a degree of freedom but at the same time a high degree of expectation. Different courses have different ways of teaching - some have more direct teaching. A lot of it has to do with the nature of the subject. We deliver some teaching in that way but not that much - a certain amount of demonstration based - but a lot of the teaching comes through the cracks - editing - how do you teach children or learners to be editorial it’s enormously difficult.³⁹

The College runs classes for learners with severe learning disabilities – learners in the past that were considered as ‘unteachable’ and moved from Special Schools into community care settings.

Fourteen years ago the College set up OurFlowers which is a floristry business that sells flowers to staff and to other members of the wider College community. The learners run the company – they are members of its board and they handle the money and make decisions about its operations. The programme appears to be successful in building the identity of learners. The lecturer who runs the program gave the example of how one of the learners accepted to chair the Board meeting and one of the learners praised her at the end of it and told her what a good job she had done – apparently the student’s self esteem rocketed because experiencing success for these learners was rare in the educational histories and the giving and receiving feedback demonstrated a sophisticated level of skills for both learners. They get to share in the company’s profits – they get a bonus of around £40 that they can spend on whatever they want like a radio or hairdryer and they arrange an annual dinner – as a treat the lecturer arranged for stretch limousine to take them to restaurant. The learners also went on two residential trips over the year. For some this was their first experience of independent living – to wash dishes and other chores. So this is a productive family with everyone, regardless of who they are and what disabilities they may have, given the opportunity to contribute and participate.⁴⁰

The Vice Principal explains the centrality of work:

There are no miracles here – the Principal often when she makes the economic case for the College says we are New Cross not Gerrards Cross – not a middle class area so our learners are different. And I say no – the slogan for me is this is New Cross not Lourdes. No miracles happen here, no one gets up and walks. The stuff that happens here is because of input. It happens because people will work with them to develop and begin to create futures with them.

³⁹ Interview, Head of Catering and Hospitality, 7 April, 2008.

⁴⁰ Observation Notes, April-May, 2008.
- done through hard work – it’s a partnership. People coming here passively wanting something to happen – it doesn’t work, they have to connect with it.  

There are several dimensions of how the College manages expectations. A careers adviser notes that they attempt to support everyone’s ambition by helping individuals refine that ambition and understand what they need to do to achieve it. She comments: “we will sit down and be really realistic with them look at their qualifications, their education background, their employment background and what is going to be their next step”.

Clearly some learners have unrealistic ambitions and perhaps lack a sense of perspective in how quickly they can progress. An interesting point made by the careers staff was the need to promote those learners who go on and succeed in ordinary jobs:

We want posters of our learners that have left and are stars - not just the one who went to Oxford (although I am sure we will have one of her) but also those who went and achieved their ambition such as someone who has come along and said I want to be an administration assistant or a traffic warden or I want to work in a bank or work on a building - these are the subjects that we teach and let’s start showing our learners that there is nothing wrong with these jobs you wanted to be this and now you are.

Authenticity of learning is also considered to be key. The Head of Catering and Hospitality explains how his classrooms operate:

I think the area is run very much like a restaurant or hotel – it is very formally run, There is a hierarchy and learners know it. Learners call the lecturer chef and call managers by their surnames, so in that respect it is different to the rest of the College – they got to get use to what it’s like in industry – it is very formal and hierarchical. We get them to understand the importance of being on time and there are procedures in place if they are not on time. So we do run as much as we can do like a business. My favourite thing is that all our learners say good morning to us. It’s the first thing we teach them and it becomes part of the way of life. It is a big learning curve from ignoring people at school to having interaction and being reasonable polite to people. We make sure they know how lucky they are to work in these places. Because they have to work hard to get where they are going to so they respect their placement. They have this attitude that we’re the best and that’s okay. It’s that reality check – this is just the beginning of their career pathway.

The same applies to less traditional vocational areas such as media. The Lecturer comments that it is important to make learners have a realistic sense of how difficult it is to operate in the media industry. He said that he spends a lot of time saying “no” to learners who want hand holding when

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41 Interview, Vice Principal, 7 April, 2008.
42 Interview, Careers Adviser, 1 May, 2008
43 ibid
44 Interview, Head of Catering and Hospitality, 7 April, 2008.
they need to stand on their own: “I don’t believe you should be that nice to them. They need quite a lot of challenge.”

Wenger (1998) calls this “peripherality” where newcomers are offered casual but legitimate accesses to a practice without being subjected to demands of full membership. These experiences act as points of connection or corridors between communities of practice. However, he suggests that peripherality is an ambiguous position where: “access to practice is possible, but it can also be a position where outsiders are kept from moving further inward” (p. 120). That is consistent with what a number of College staff pointed out – that whilst students are exposed to a range of workplace settings the absence of being sponsored by an employer (for example, through an apprenticeship) can mean it is difficult for a learner to move beyond the periphery into employment.

That sense of realism, of being educated in how the industry operates applies equally to staff. Vocational teaching staff are expected to maintain close links with their industry. In the catering school staff spend one week each year on a placement in a leading London restaurant. The Head Hospitality and Catering comments “they come back thrilled – they want to learn and absorb new things and always come back having picked up a new trick”. This authenticity provide the means by which both staff and learners can acquire the skills and practices to gain entry into other communities of practice – that is, it provides them with the currency to trade from a boundary into more legitimate forms of participation.

This extends into how pedagogy is developed as well. The College operates on developing vocational experts rather educational experts that underpins their whole approach to teacher training. The Head of Teacher Training explained that argument goes back to the 1990s that all teachers in further education should have a degree. There was an assumption that as primary and secondary school teachers have degrees FE teachers should also. That assumption was built around FE colleges being primarily academic institutions as opposed skills development institutions and all the vocational teaching was at a second class addendum to the academic A level agenda. The programmes would take vocational teachers and shoe horn them into a teacher training programme, not designed primarily to improve their teaching, but to improve their academic and study skills to enable them to access progression to a degree. The increasing number of teachers who were skilled based were coming in with qualifications that did not allow them to jump into the

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45 Interview, Lecturer (Media Studies), 25 April, 2008.

46 Interview, Head of Catering and Hospitality, 7 April, 2008.
Certificate of Education because they were coming in with Level 3 NVQs so jumping to level 4 and level 5 was problematic. He comments “people were opting out they were running away they were avoiding qualifications and the idea of teacher training was a misery”. The College started to experiment with a completely revised delivery of teacher training that revolved around what learners loved best which was micro teaching where they did 15 minutes at the beginning of the course where they teach their peers and get lots of feedback. The College built it into the course so that it became integrated part of the course. They set up a programme called transforming teaching and set up in each of the schools a peer quality improvement programme built around action research. Groups would get together and get an hour’s remission a week to jointly plan lesson observe each other teaching plan resource together start activity based. The initial teacher training trainees brought their ideas into the teacher training class - they also took their experience and took them back to their peers in these development groups. He adds “there was a buzz in the College that started being reflected in the teaching grades”. As a result, they made a list of all the things a good teacher should be able to do at the end of a programme and then designed the assessment on that basis and the result was that it became an authentic assessment in the sense that learners were being assessed on what they did, not on what they thought they should do, that is, write essays and then the academic part of the programme was a reflection on practice.\textsuperscript{47}

The Head of Teacher Training explains how ongoing classroom practice is developed:

This is another transformation that is going on because we are now called the teacher development unit as opposed to the teacher training unit and the reason for that is the line being drawn between initial teacher training and ongoing development is becoming more fuzzy. The idea that you start your teacher training and continue on with your cpd. It is statutory now that you have to complete a min of 30 hrs CPD [continuing professional development] a year. The way we have designed the portfolio we call it the practice bank and the idea of that is that it is something you put stuff into and take stuff out of. Because one of the things people would do all the lesson planning and the evaluations and assessments and put it into a great big file and submit it and it would be assessed and retuned and they never bothered to pick it up because that was history. Now technically it is history but it is also evidence and then we come to the CPD - do you do another portfolio so what we are trying to do is that this portfolio in your first year you put in your lesson plans and in your second year you might do a better one so you take the old one out and put the new one in. When you come to apply for another job you can take it along and say this is my best work. As CPD you carry on this process - a lifelong CPD.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{47} Interview, Head of Teacher Training, 1 May, 2008.

\textsuperscript{48} ibid
Another aspect of the College’s attempt to be as close to the “real world” is the presence of a strong management culture. A staff member makes the following observation:

Very strong management culture, very centrally and very hierarchically structured and as a result a very well organised college which has a very high priority around learners and learner advancement and always very keen to stay in step with government policy - whether this sits comfortably with the College or not.\textsuperscript{49}

Lindell (2006) notes that education reform has been characterised by the march toward managerialism within vocational education. In terms of the dynamics of implementing employability policies, the strong management culture in the College has possible facilitated its success in developing solutions that are considered palatable to government.

Part of that management approach is about managing the external environment. The Vice Principal explains how this works:

The Principal talks of ‘bifocalism’ – achieving ambitions means achieving the nations ambitions which is about national prosperity and the concept that the more people that work the better services you’ll get – we believe in that. On an individual level for our 16 year old learner who has come out school with very few qualifications. First of all you get them to dare to dream, to be ambitious and then give them the confidence to achieve those ambitions. Bifocalism – looking at the individual but also looking at your responsibility for your community and area. If FE delivers it job, then the country will be more prosperous, more people will be working and we will have better services for our kids and our families. So it does look in both directions – that’s why it is quite clever.\textsuperscript{50}

4.3 The Family and the World Outside

An important part of how the College works is about its connections with the world beyond its boundaries. The College has a phrase that is another one of those memes “the College is not a destination but a gateway”.\textsuperscript{51} A successful learning experience at the College is not an end in itself unless it provides the currency to build a successful economic future. The ultimate test of creating self belief and building resilience in learners is their capacity to negotiate their way into other communities of practice: to cross boundaries and develop their competence. Wenger (2000) describes the pitfalls of not being able move from one community to another:

\textsuperscript{49} ibid

\textsuperscript{50} Interview, Vice Principal, 7 April, 2008.

\textsuperscript{51} Interview, Principal, 19 May, 2008.
If experience and competence are too disconnected, if the distance is too great, not much learning is likely to take place either. Sitting by a group of high-energy particle physicists, you might not learn much because of the distance between your own experience and the competence you are confronting is just too great. Mostly what you are learning is that you do not belong (p. 233).

However, the nature of the boundary between the College and world beyond is complex as are the dynamics of how the College positions itself in relation to these.

How the College adapts to the external world and responds is shaped by a number of signals such as government policy as expressed through the funding system, the inspection system and competition for learners:

Pressure to improve teaching, learning and management in FE are primarily externally driven by concerns other than the nature of teaching and learning...Learning in FE is pressurised and destabilised by a combination of inadequate and unstable funding and audit regime, focused on targets, achievement and OFSTED\(^1\) inspection standards (Hodkinson et al., 2005, p. 7).

These mechanisms are the product of much wider forces, namely:

(i) Globalisation and the focus on delivery outcomes

(ii) Pressures on public funding and the need to find different ways of rationing resources

(iii) Changes in employment demanding convergence between further and higher education

(iv) Demands for promote greater and wider participation to promote social inclusions

(v) Technological changing the modalities of delivery education

(vi) General erosion of professional autonomy and movement toward standardisation of education

All these factors create a complicated and unstable environment filled with contradictions and pluralities (Simkins and Lumby, 2002). This new discourse of further education privileges closer economic partnerships between business, employers and colleges (Gleeson and Knights, 2008).

4.3.1 What Government Expects
The College engages closely with the Government’s agenda. As the Vice Principal comments:

This is a College that is very responsive not just to learners and employers but to government’s agendas. We’re not someone who sees government agendas as an obstacle but we actually see them as a part – we take them into purpose and then we translate them into deliverables. So some colleges see government as almost spokes that get in the way of
them actually doing the job they want to do – we say that’s our purpose to interpret government policies into deliverable programmes. And then making sure our mission around inclusivity and responsiveness are always underpinning everything we are doing. So we are quick to respond, make sure that we communicate both ways, that we accept government agendas but we also inform government on the appropriateness or success of their agenda. So every time we are asked to consult we will pick out what works, what’s good, and what we will support. And then we won’t be critical but we will say what they can do strengthen it – so acceptance of our role is not declaring UDI\textsuperscript{52}, of actually seeing we are an arm of government and as the Principal says we are the adaptive layer, that is our role, to go where other people don’t go\textsuperscript{53}.

The benefit for the College has been that it has been ahead of policy – and in several respects shaping the future of further education. The Principal requires all her senior staff to sit on national committee – partly to raise the profile of further education but also to “see what’s coming” and to influence it\textsuperscript{54}. There are, however, some externalities of this greater engagement that seem to be widely recognised by the staff. The Vice Principal suggests that it brings with it raised expectations. When asked whether the College gets an ‘easier’ ride because of its profile he comments:

Not sure it’s an easier ride. But because of that role we get a much broader remit than many other colleges – a lot greater expectation that we will step up and lead on issues which sometimes really challenges our capacity to deliver because we are just an FE college. One thing we have to keep in proportion is that we are an FE college in SE London and there are 40 other FE colleges in London. We are not Oxford or Cambridge. We are an FE college who is delivering to the local community and sometimes people can get FE out of proportion and actually think that there are 4-5 FE colleges leading the way, but we are not, there’s FE on every corner. What we are is in a way like what some large comprehensives are which have found ways to interpret and deliver government policy. And realising that is our role – that is what we are funded to do. A lot of colleges forget that. We get a bigger ride, our mistakes are more visible and we are more accountable\textsuperscript{55}.

Accordingly, the learning environment for workforces within a further education college are “constructed and sustained through working out of tensions experienced between external criteria for performance and those ‘ecologies of practice’ that frame identity and reality making among FE professionals” (Gleeson et al., 2005, p. 456).

The staff comment about how the environment can be quite challenging because there is always something changing, always pushing into new areas and refining existing ones. There have also

\begin{equation*}
\text{\textsuperscript{52} UDI – unilateral declaration of independence.}
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\begin{equation*}
\text{\textsuperscript{53} Interview, Vice Principal, 7 April, 2008.}
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\text{\textsuperscript{54} Interview, Principal, 19 May, 2008.}
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\text{\textsuperscript{55} Interview, Vice Principal, 7 April, 2008.}
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been some issues in innovating ahead of the sector and government policy generally as was the experience with the changes to teacher training:

Then the LLUK guidelines were published and then we had to track our programme furiously to those and because there is still in the country an assumption that every teacher in FE must have a degree we got a more problematic course than we would have chosen to have. But what we have done is to say we don't want our vocational teachers to have degrees what we want them to have is the highest qualification in their vocation that is appropriate so it might be level 4 or 5 but in NVQ style and increasingly there are vocational degrees and evidenced based degrees coming on to the market that they can engage with - our ideas are not radical in the sense that they are new in vocationalism they are radical in the sense of FE teacher training.

This underscores the point that middle-level managers “have the tricky task of constructing the art of the possible in translating policy into practice in ways that are acceptable” to those both above and below them (Gleeson and Shain, 1999, p. 471). These managers are required to traverse the complex space between curriculum and pedagogy and satisfying the demands of public sector delivery edicts around value for money and quality or “professionalism” versus “managerialism”.

4.3.2 Being ‘Fit for the World’

An interesting observation from the learners is that whilst the College pulls out all stops to help them achieve and successfully complete their qualification they are less positive about whether they can continue to succeed beyond its walls. A number told me that when they completed their course they were keen to emigrate because they perceived their chances for succeeding in work were much better elsewhere. This suggests that they sense their capacity to succeed will not just been down to their efforts but could be stymied by discrimination and prejudice. The Principal acknowledges this and comments that improving the employability of learners is not just a matter of getting learners fit for the world work but also making the world fit for them. I asked her how they did that:

In all sorts of ways. I would work at having our learners serving drinks at No. 10 [Prime Minister’s residence] so people could see FE learners. I would awareness raise about the quality of the product from FE. I make compacts with organisations. I arrange internships with business - so I would go about changing the world’s expectation of us. That’s what I mean. Try and make employers better at what they do for us and GURU the same, work with universities - there for adventures with the world. To get out into the world and argue for change^56.

However, the transition into work remains hugely challenging. A careers adviser comments:

The Government is not creating enough opportunities outside of college for learners to take an apprenticeship particular adult apprenticeships because if you don’t practice your skills-

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^56 Interview, Principal, [date]
we have a lots of adults who would love to be apprentices and a lot of them are re-training or they have come from abroad and a lot of employers are not going to recognise their qualifications here and they know they need to do something else. It needs government to have that bigger conversation with employers - you want that workforce, you want them ready but you need to come through now. And I am sure what happens is that they keep talking to the people who are already doing it - they need to start to convince perhaps some of the small to medium employers that there is something in it for them to train people I am not sure how you do that but getting rid of some of the paper work - all this money going into young people what about some money going into apprenticeships - what about an apprenticeship loan making attractive to employers because it is not working from where I am sitting57.

Which underscores the point the Theodore and Peck (2000) make that employability is all well and good but unless there are jobs at the other end the risk is that problem of unemployment merely shifts from a concern for government to the ‘fault’ of the individual. It also typifies the perceived relationship between policy and practice. The absence of a clear dialogue between policymakers and practitioners highlights the two unreconcilable contexts Lindell (2006) refers to.

4.3.3 Reputation and Perceptions
The Vice Principal comments that the Principal’s significant national profile is not important necessarily to the College or to the staff – its importance lies is raising the reputation of its learners and thereby improving their chances of moving into higher education or employment58.

The College has built up a solid reputation amongst employers and the further education sector as an excellent provider of education and training – as evidenced by the high levels of income that it is able to generate from its business development work. It is much tougher to change perceptions in the local community as the Head of Hospitality and Catering observes:

People have long memories and that’s kind of the problem. Just being an outstanding college doesn’t necessarily get you known at there – the normal public don’t particularly care that you’re an outstanding college and beacon college – they probably don’t even know what it is. Same with employers they don’t care either. It’s my one big criticism of the college that we often think because we are outstanding that everyone knows that we are. A big downfall for us and we need to get that message out there. With catering employers it has taken us a long time to break into that because we didn’t have a reputation whereas we have been an outstanding college since there have been inspections – how we do that I don’t know. For the industry it’s easier and sends learners to us but how to do we convince the local community to send its young people for training in vocational areas and that’s what we have to concentrate on59.

57 Interview, Careers Adviser, 1 May, 2008.

58 Interview, Vice Principal, 7 April, 2008.

59 Interview, Head of Catering and Hospitality, 7 April, 2008.
The Principal argues that this is a function of a broader phenomenon about community perceptions of public services generally. Taylor (2008) suggests:

As a government adviser, I would bemoan what we in Whitehall called the perception gap. Time and again, opinion polls expose a dramatic disparity between what people say about their personal experiences and about the state of things in general. Take attitudes towards public services. In a recent poll, 81 per cent of respondents said that they were happy with their last visit to hospital. Yet when the same people were asked whether they thought the National Health Service was providing a good service nationally, only 47 per cent felt able to declare it was so, and most think the NHS is going to get worse.

Although typically reputation issues are not framed within discussions about employability, they do play an important part in both the attractiveness of further education qualifications from a particular college (as an indicator of the likely calibre of the candidate) and feed into wider perceptions about the currency and value of further education more generally. This also further complicates the dynamics of implementing the employability agenda as this lack of status and recognition for the sector is corrosive and potentially leads to a culture of compliance where colleges follow the letter but not the spirit of policy which is what Lindell’s (2006) research shows.

4.4 Family Future

4.4.1 Shifting Fortunes

Further education in England occupies an uneasy place trying to bridge the vocational and the academic and to provide pathways for individuals who have not gained educational qualifications through traditional routes – what is mistakenly called “second chance” education – mistaken because it presumes there was a genuine “first chance” available to individuals. The Principal refers to further education as the “adaptive layer” of the education system: school education is compulsory and higher education is selective so further education occupies that place between those two points and is therefore more susceptible to shifting government agendas. The Principal suggests:

FE has always been clear about what it is, government got muddled. The agenda is the original agenda about industrialisation and skills - we have always been clear that is what we were and second chances in that. We are good at occupational stuff and we are good at academic stuff but we have never been good at that middle layer of technicians - in other countries technicians are the spur for creativity. So we have another generation of the same old problem. I heard Tony Benn\(^\text{60}\) talk once and he said this is a pre second world war problem that was dealt with by the war re-armament and rebuilding of industrialisation, the war just gave a punctuation to that and actually it was in war the technicians - the maintenance of airplanes an intelligent technician workforce is key. So we have tried to fill

\(^{60}\) Tony Benn, is highly regarded British socialist politician.
that hole a million times instead of doing it with high level skills we have done it with general education programmes\textsuperscript{61}.

Part of the College’s success has been in straddling the dual agendas of inclusion and employability and it remains unclear just where the balance lies in terms of the direction of Government policy. As the Principal notes Government remains “muddled” and has struggled to locate further education firmly within the vocational and technical skills formation space. Current proposals to raise compulsory education to eighteen years of age will further blur the role of further education as it is used as an alternative place to school for those young people unable to fit into the mainstream educational offer.

In some respects this is retreat to the post-war environment where further education was the training arm of industry – the issue today is that for some learners within this College family they won’t fit the mould and without an emphasis on inclusive pathways may find themselves shut out of a system that works for some but not for all.

4.4.2 What about the Neighbours?
One of the challenges for the College is working with its neighbours in the education space – schools as a source of learners and higher education institutions as a potential destination. The Principal explains how they manage the relationship with schools:

Our junior skills academy of 500 kids is an example of how we get into schools to show them what FE can do. Of course they send us the ones they don’t want but in doing that and in their interaction with us they see all we can do here - and over the years that has got better and better. We sit on local panels - the funding for schools means they will never send us their people. Schools are finding ways of holding onto kids. With widening participation into HE with the new diplomas they will stay in school. Parents want their young people to be somewhere safe and actually 13,000 adults isn’t a safe place in their eyes but this is the safest place in New Cross. But for a mum and dad thinking about all those big people - and sex and drugs - we are working against the grain of society we are scarier that way. So I open my doors we collaborate with schools for New Cross People’s Day but we have schools that won’t allow us to go in\textsuperscript{62}.

And as one member of staff told me the competition is intense:

You are asking schools to shoot themselves in the foot by asking people to leave, I worked in schools for many years before I moved into FE and the pressure for youngsters to stay in school. I have been carpeted by headteachers for even mentioning FE - how very dare you - schools get money for bums on seats for sixth form - they are not going to promote other

\textsuperscript{61} Interview, Principal, 19 May, 2008.

\textsuperscript{62} Interview, Principal, 19 May, 2008.
options. It is the students they want to get rid of that they will heavily promote other options.\textsuperscript{63}

The same is not true of higher education – perhaps because the College is an additional source of potential learners. A number of staff told me about the positive relationship the College has with Higher Education Institutions “we are in partnership with our local universities and they will fall over themselves to help you.”\textsuperscript{64}

There have been failed marriages in this family. There are three further education colleges in this part of South London and a considerable amount of work took place to consolidate and build closer ties between all three colleges. These discussions fell apart at the end of 2007 as noted in the Minutes of Dulwich Community College Corporation (5 December 2007) in “interests of learners and staff at the College” a merger that involved a takeover by New Cross was not acceptable.

This demonstrates the family rivalry that exists that clearly is not in the interests of the learner but anchored in the politics of jealousy that afflicts the “Cinderella” type perceptions of further education. An interesting fact the Vice Principal told me was that the funding agency prevents colleges from promoting themselves as “better than” any other College and sanctions could apply if they did. That complicates the capacity of further education colleges to take the employability agenda forward if there are limits on promoting successful ways of working.\textsuperscript{65}

4.5 Discussion

4.5.1 The Adaptive or Compensatory Layer
The College is a good example of how further education in England is changing. It raises the question as to whether what is taking place is adaptation or compensatory – picking up the point learners made about the College being seen as a destination for those who cannot achieve (“this is where the waste comes”) and noting the lecturers continually pointed out the shifting curriculum to a greater emphasis on basic skills, where does vocationalism sit within this? As the Vice Principal told me the College has two to three years to take learners on an educational journey that schools have eleven years to achieve.\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{63} Interview, Careers Adviser, 1 May, 2008.

\textsuperscript{64} ibid

\textsuperscript{65} Interview, Vice Principal, 7 April, 2008.

\textsuperscript{66} Interview, Vice Principal, 7 April, 2008.
That has broader implications for the employability agenda. “Adaptation” implies a degree of agility, of responsiveness to the demands of the economy and employers. Whereas “compensation” is about filling in gaps, making good the failures of other parts of the system. In terms of employability, playing a compensatory role is likely to compromise the capacity of further education to tackle head on the specific vocational skills demanded by an increasingly global economy where competition from emerging economies such as China and India are becoming quite adept at producing good technicians. This is likely to test the strength of the College’s extended family – it capacity to work with learners, provide them with a broad offer of support and negotiate pathways for them into work and higher education. It is, perhaps, not surprising that some further education colleges in England are moving off-shore and expanding significantly into Asia. This allows them to effectively re-negotiate their settlement by trading in other markets where the demands are somewhat different and the complexities of dealing with policy imperatives are significantly diminished.

4.5.2 Lessons and Generalities

As a paradigmatic case study, the question arises from the experience at New Cross: are these experiences replicable in other contexts? The Principal offers some advice on that point:

I think there is a formula to what we do - it’s like Lego - if the Lego bits are student centeredness, teacher development, partnerships, curriculum development, study buddies and so on my guess is that it is replicable. And it's even better than that - it's replicable and adaptable. Because the bits are the same they are just reordered to context and needs.

What I haven’t had time to do and perhaps what retirement is for me, or what you are doing, is can I excavate from these parables what are really the bits that matter - what forms the Gestalt. That’s not enough of course so there’s the spirit which is about leadership, the spirit of the organisation I think the phrase is distributed leadership not like there is “the leader” I don’t believe in leaders but I do believe in leadership though. The definition I have for that is having the capacity to win hearts. You can’t buy a heart, you can’t instruct a heart. My guess is that it is highly replicable and it might be in the description of FE - FE is under-theorised, under-researched, under-conceptualised so it might be with a body of knowledge that we can take that further. It’s highly ordinary and obvious really if you think about the learner the rest falls into place.

There are several lessons that emerge from how this family operates that are instructive in understanding how the Government’s employability agenda is implemented within a further education college:

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67 Interview, Principal, 19 May, 2008.
• The experience at New Cross College is that it is important that vocational education is aligned with the employability through three key elements: technical skills, the opportunity to practice and refine those technical skills and underpinning knowledge – which have been the hallmark of further education since its inception.

• The College’s good networks with the local community and employers have been important but not sufficient in pushing forward this agenda – it is one thing to have an understanding of the skills that the market demands it is another thing entirely to be able to deliver them;

• The College demonstrates powerfully that it is important to be more “more than” a college. For many learners that come to further education there is a significant amount of work around repairing the damage that inhibits self belief and formation of identity – this is complex and part of a host of inter-related issues such as dealing with home circumstances, basic skills needs and issues around sense of self and identity. As Wenger (1998) notes “it involves the whole person in a dynamic interplay of participation and reification. It is not reducible to mechanics (information, skills, behaviour), and focusing on the mechanics at the expense of meaning tends to render learning problematic” (p. 226). Without sufficient regard to these factors further education fails to provide the means by which people can make the transition to adulthood or more productive lives. There are pitfalls – the College found that providing a caring environment without providing individuals with the skills to be independent breeds dependency and creates a ‘safe harbour’ that makes the individual’s transition into the world of work problematic.

• The experience of the College is that generativity – as a stage where individuals as adults can be productive in the sense of actively contributing to society takes much more than preparing them to leave “home” and arming them with the skills employers are looking for. Someone may be ‘employable’ from an objective perspective – that is, they have the technical skills, the attitudinal characteristics and motivation to the job but all of that does not necessarily lead them into work. There have to be the opportunities in first place and access to those opportunities. The College identified that tackling disadvantage, prejudice and a lack of awareness of the products of the further education are all important aspects of being able to close the gap between employability and real jobs, with genuine prospects.

• Organisational requirements – as the Principal notes – the work of a College has to be (a) fit for purpose; (b) fit for context; and (c) fit for phase – those three tests are perhaps another way of saying that it is not possible to replicate in a simplistic way and there is a degree of calibration required to address the specific circumstances of a college. The educational landscape is littered with “best practice” examples that are slavishly followed only to find they do not work. Similarly a strong management culture is important in negotiate policy arrangements with government.
It could be argued that the employability discourse, even though it is pervasive and its global currents are observable in vocational education systems around the world, is faltering. Reed (2005) notes the view of network theorists that suggest that “we have reached a period in human history and development where the ‘variable geometry’ of network organizing is strong and powerful enough to displace, marginalize, and eventually replace the ‘fixed geometry’ of bureaucratic organisation” (p. 133). The increasingly competitive nature of the labour market coupled with the intensity of competition for places in what are considered the elite educational establishments more and more adults are being left behind without the basic skills to be able to advance in either learning or employment. In part that is the product of a changing economy, particularly in London, where the demand is for high skilled workers and unskilled jobs (such as those that existed in manufacturing) are fast disappearing. That has placed an even greater premium on skills acquisition and the development of technical expertise. There remains a gap in vocational expertise and further education with its increasing emphasis on younger people and basic skills means that that provision is being eroded.

Extending this further – is that learning cultures in a college are part of the broader community within which a college operates, extending out to employers, community agencies and others who interact with it. Hodkinson et al. (2007) suggest that it is:

A learning culture does not have precise boundaries, and the field of force operates at all scales of investigation, from the individual learner, to macro issues of social structure and globalisation. Furthermore, all places where people live and interact have a learning culture, which are the practices through which people learn in that place. These social practices include but are not limited to micro-politics as well as macro-politics, at a national and European Union level (p. 401).

If that is correct, where does it leave a slew of policies around employability that attempt to standardise and homogenise practice?

The current prevalence of hortatory and normative literature fired by an insatiable government appetite for formulas of ‘good practice’ is not likely to encourage the complex analysis needed to illuminate cultural change. A focus on internal arenas could lead, amongst other things, to a more sophisticated consideration of changing patterns of power, influence and authority among stakeholders and the way in which these are used to shape the emerging college culture (Simkins and Lumby, 2002, p. 22).

As Wenger (1998) states “one can design systems of accountability and policies for communities of practices to live by, but one cannot design the practices that will emerge in response to such institutional systems” (p. 229).
The alternative is view is that the neo-liberal discourse of employability is far from failing. Its steady march towards the marketisation of education, forging closer ties with economic needs and the labour market, are necessary steps to building a world where individuals take greater responsibility for their learning and success in the workplace. The strength of this discourse is apparent in the language of Government policy on employability:

We want to create a nation where all adults, whether employees, employers, self-employed or non-employed, understand that training is the only reliable route to sustained employability, progression and success over a lifetime (DIUS, 2007, p.35).

Perhaps what is faltering is the commitment of educators to learning that is consigned to creating economic value. As New Cross College underlined the importance of being “more than a college”, the logic holds that education needs to be “more than training”.

4.6 Relevance to Understanding Employability
This study has affirmed some of the general themes in previous research on FE – particularly in the need to understand the granularity of learning cultures. Employability policies as they relate to FE colleges are somewhat of a blunt instrument in attending to the complex issues facing colleges in assisting their learners to make the transition from learning to work. What this study demonstrates is that the task of implementation need not be as dichotomised as Lindell (2006) presents in his model of two awkwardly related contexts of policy and practice. Looked at as complex systems, colleges that construct environments around well-adapted relationship both within and without can serve to make the pathway for the learner into the world of work a more direct one, albeit for many, not a linear one. Viewed as an extended family, a college can put in place the relationships, networks and supports necessary to repair the damage of schooling, develop literacies and serve in constructing the identity of the learner. In addressing those aspects of learner needs it is easy to identify dysfunctional family elements that do not support individual development and enable the learner to progress through learning and into work – FE education needs to invest learners with a ‘learning dowry’ that enables them to have a means of trading into new relationships within the work place and move from boundaries to centres of community of practice.

Clearly, this is an area where more research is needed. The ethnographic methods employed in this study were useful and it is unlikely that the issues drawn out here could have been surfaced with a quantitative study. Similarly, because the research questions in this study have not been the subject of research in the past, the absence of any preconceived obligations to a particularly theoretical construct or the need to test a particular hypothesis were helpful design features to identify the critical issues. However, more observation of teaching and learning may have uncovered with
greater clarity the phenomenological patterns of experience for both staff and learners in this environment. It would also have been useful to interview more front-line staff to see the extent to which the employability discourse had permeated the culture of the College and concomitant effects on teaching and learning practice. There are several important areas of the relationship between government and colleges which have not been explored here – particularly the impact of funding and the external performance management and inspection regime – all of which are likely to have a profound effects on the psychology of how colleges as systems relate to these governmental systems.

The diagram below shows the nested systems of learner, college and state and the relationships that connect them. The learner is the nucleus common to each system. Accordingly, just as the learner and the teacher co-constructing learning in relationship so does the college and the state – all with a clear objective of helping the learner to progress into a productive future either in work or via further study. This brings into unity the binary oppositions in Diagram 1 (page 12) of individual/state and technical/personality and Diagram 2 (page 15) centralisation/decentralisation and political/professional. When viewed as a series of nested systems these divides and the forces that create them are dissipated. That is not to suggest that there are no conflicts or tensions – for these surely remain and perhaps intensified through the dynamic nature of relationships. What the experience at New Cross College demonstrated that by aligning systems around the progression of the learner there is a rational basis for resolving these tensions.

*Diagram 3: Co-emerged Learning, Political and Policy Relationships*
5. Conclusion: Implications and Opportunities

If we accept that central to the employability agenda is the formation of identity, then “learning communities will become places of identity to the extent they make trajectories possible – that is, to the extent they offer a past and a future that can be experienced as a personal trajectory” (Wenger, 1998, p. 215). In negotiating meaning and developing competence, rehearsal space, the ability to practice and develop competence, offers the clearest pathway to gain entry to other communities – particularly in the context of employment. What the experience at the College demonstrated is that this is a complex process which requires the formation of relationships within which identities can be constructed. That is, in responding to the challenges the learner faces in their development, the issue about implementing the employability agenda needs to be reframed: it is less about “failure” residing in the individual and more about addressing the breakdown of social relations and sociocultural practices (Matusov 2007). Recognition of learning as being socially constructed means the curriculum and the learning experience must extend beyond the traditionally boundaries of mastering skills to creating the desire and the confidence to acquire those skills and to find the means to negotiate boundaries and move amongst communities of practice – either within education or employment.

There are wider implications for how FE colleges as communities interact with the overall system of education. Unless attention is given to these finer details of the dynamics within FE colleges, Government policy becomes little more than the expression of a desire which has no clear mechanism to be fulfilled – there remains as Lindell (2006) suggests two contexts responding to different sets of signals. The lesson for policy makers is to work with colleges to co-construct policy and to learn more effectively through the process of implementation. However, this raises issues about how this would work with colleges that do not have the capacity to engage at this level and also how policy makers deal with this plurality of response and practice. Further research would be useful to deepen the understanding of how these dynamics operate in other colleges and whether these issues connect to a broader global discourse and are evident in further educational institutions in other jurisdictions.

This study does, however, lays bare the frailty of the neo-liberal discourse on employability that trips itself on its own flawed logic that by necessity learning is conceived as an individual rather than social construct. Until that logic is corrected, the Cinderella service will remain tormented by the unforgiving stepsisters: schools and higher education. Or put another way, enabling learners to live
lives through “choice rather than fate”, as seems to be primary mission of New Cross College, speaks
to the need for a broader view. The absence of a clear reciprocity between the learner and the
community at large means that the *quid pro quo* of the community not having any obligation to the
learner is that in turn the learner has no obligation to participate in civil society (Davies, 2005).
6. **Research Biography**

The field research for this project was conducted on site at New Cross College from February to May, 2008. Field visits were as follows:

- 1 February – meeting with Senior Management Team and tour of the College, meetings with other key staff
- 12 March – College Governors’ Annual Fundraising Dinner
- 26 March – meeting with the Principal
- 27 April – formal interview of administrative officer
- 7 April – meeting with Principal, formal interviews of Vice Principal and Head of Hospitality and Catering
- 25 April formal interview of lecturer – cultural industries
- 1 May – formal interview of careers advisers, Head of Teacher Training and Basis Skills Teacher. Observation of basic skills class (OurFlowers) for students with severe learning difficulties
- 2 May – Student Focus Group
- 19 May – formal interview of Principal

The College also provided me with access to:

- Blackboard – the College intranet site
- Minutes and agenda papers for meetings of the Corporation (Governors) 2005-2008
- A range of College strategic documents from 1993 to 2008
- A range of curriculum documents
- The College History – spanning 1880s to 1990
- Various promotional videos
- Various DVD and CD-ROM material on teaching programmes

Interviews were conducted on site and the standard interview questions appear below. The same broad themes were covered in the student focus group.

**Guide Questions for Conversations with Staff at New Cross**

1. **Mission and Values**
   - How would you describe the College? What characterises New Cross? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
   - What does the College’s strap line “achieving ambitions” mean to you?
   - What does a good education at New Cross look like and what are the key outcomes for your students?
   - What’s your experience of New Cross as a workplace: tell me about your work, how you think it contributes to the “achieving ambitions”, what have been the ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ of your experience?
   - Has the purpose and direction of the College changed? If so, in what ways?
2. **Notions of employability?**

- Tell me what you think makes someone “employable”?
- How does New Cross prepare students for the world of work? Do you think that differs depending the type of course (eg basic skills to foundation degrees)?
- What is the destination of students who complete courses at New Cross? Has this changed over time? If so, why do you think it has changed?
- Whose responsibility is it for students to find employment? Tell me why you think that is the case?
- What role do you think the College plays for those students who are already in work?
- How do you think the College deals with individual needs and ‘difference’? Has this changed? If so, in what ways and for what reasons? Are there any students you think the College is not so successful in engaging? If so, why?
- In terms of New Cross as an employer, tell me how you see the work experience you have gained here and in what ways do you think it has enhanced your career prospects or not?

3. **Government Policies**

- Tell me what you think the Government expects of the College? How have you arrived at that understanding?
- Are there any specific policies or initiatives that you think are particularly relevant to shaping what the College should be achieving?
- How do you see those policies being implemented within the College?

4. **Wider Community**

- Tell me who you think are the College’s partners and how would you characterise those relationships? Do they vary and why?
- How do you think New Cross is perceived in the local community? Have those perceptions changed? If so, how and why?
- What role do you think the community plays in how New Cross responds to its students? What role should it play?

All the interview was digitally recorded and later transcribed using transcription software and copying the final text into word documents. A research journal was also kept over the period of the field visits and recorded observations and reflections on the experience.
## Appendix 1: National Qualification Framework

### The NQF and the FHEQ

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Qualifications Framework (NQF)</th>
<th>Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Previous levels (and examples)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Current levels (and examples)</strong></td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>Specialist awards</td>
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<td>Level 5 Diploma in Translation</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Level 7 Diploma in Translation</td>
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<td>Level 4 NVQ in Advice and Guidance</td>
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<td>Level 6 National Diploma in Professional Production Skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 4 Certificate in Early Years</td>
<td>Level 5 BTEC Higher National Diploma in 3D Design</td>
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<td>Level 4 Certificate in Early Years</td>
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<td>Level 1 NVQ in Bakery</td>
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1 Revised levels are not currently being implemented for NVQs at levels 4 and 5
8. References


Dulwich College, Corporation Minutes, 5 December 2007.

European Union (2007). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social


