

Title: A Contested Profession: employability, performativity and professionalism in Irish further education

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Introduction

Further education represents the vocational, technical and practice-based forms of education, which is now repositioned in a neoliberal era driven by a performance-based and market-orientated vision of education in the Republic of Ireland and elsewhere. The implacable drive of neoliberal economics in everyday practice is evident in the current economic and training discourses of further education, aimed at upgrading the employability of low skilled and marginalized sectors of the population.

The article provides an overview of shifts in educational policy and practices that align Irish further education with what has occurred in the UK and elsewhere through processes of professionalization and performativity. Analysis of the potential impact on notions of professional identity in the sector helps to articulate the principles, pedagogies and philosophies that will be vital when contesting the performance cultures of New Managerialism that seem likely to ensue. We explore the implications in terms of the policy discourses, organizational structure and professional practices of further education. We contend that changes in these areas have profound impacts on the learning and knowledge

base of further education, constraining its social justice and transformative capacity for the learners at the heart of further education..

Further Education...defined by what it is not?

Further education in the Republic of Ireland is primarily defined in terms of negation (what it is *not*) or by outputs (such as services, training structures and qualifications) rather than in terms of its students, pedagogy or learning. The Qualifications (Education & Training) Act (1999) defines further education and training broadly as 'education and training *other than* primary or postprimary education or higher education and training'.¹ Similarly, the professional regulatory body, the Teaching Council define Further Education as '...education and training which usually occurs *outside* of post-primary schooling but which *is not* part of the third-level system.' (Teaching Council 2011:, p. 2) This places further education in a vacuum-like position; defined by its absence and lack of being. It negates the status and knowledge base of the further education sector in these constant comparisons with other education sectors. This is similar to UK generally where further education

is unified by being different (Gleeson & Mardle 1980). It is not like higher education (feet on the ground, working with difficult learners, proper 'on the job' teacher training, serving the local community, misunderstood). It is not like schools (adults, part-time students, rescuing school failures, diverse academic–vocational programmes, strong industry–business links). It provides work-based training but is not like private training organisations. (Gleeson *et al.* 2005, p. 447)

The Department of Education and Skills adopt the other main defining strategy of an output orientation listing different types of programmes and providers such as Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Courses, Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Youthreach programme for early school leavers, Back To Education Initiative (BTEI), adult literacy and community education.² Similarly the Further Education and Training Bill of 2013 defines further education in terms of its qualification outcome: 'that is not higher than level 6 specified in the National Framework of Qualifications' and secondly in terms of what it is not – in this case also excluding education provided by other professional bodies; namely excluding further education ...' within the meaning of the Solicitors (Amendment) Act 1994, the Veterinary Practice Act 2005, the Medical Practitioners Act 2007 or the Nurses and Midwives Act 2011'. (Further Education and Training Bill 2013, p. 5-6).³ This is a further

negation where education by professional bodies is also disconnected from further education; raising questions about the limits to the professionalism being envisaged for the further education sector.

These discursive practices of negative comparative definition or an outputs orientation raise interesting questions about the positioning and knowledge claims of further education. As a sector, it is continually defined by *what it is not*, and hence always reliant and reactive to these other sectors of education, or it is trapped within the performativity constraints of its outputs rather than concentrating on what further education is; its actual knowledge claims, learning processes and distinctive characteristics, to which we now turn. This reflects the contested knowledge and political positioning of further education.

The development of further education in Ireland

The further education and training sector developed in a fragmented historical context in the Republic of Ireland, emerging from the training needs of different economic sectors and state departments, often in isolation from the rest of the education system. Murtagh (2009) identifies two key stages in Irish further education. The foundation of further education was laid during the British era from the Government Recess Committee in 1896 to 1921, followed by the self-determination of the Irish era from 1922 onwards. During this latter stage, responsibilities for further education existed across a variety of statutory agencies in the departments of agriculture, forestry, marine, tourism, enterprise and employment as well as education (Murtagh 2009). Following the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, responsibility for further education passed to the Department of Education (Coolahan 1981). Under the 1930 Vocational Education Act, further education and training's role was defined as continuation education for 14-16 years old and technical education in trades for those between 16 and 18 years (Hyland and Milne 1992). This legislation enabled the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) to become the major statutory providers of vocational education for adults in second, higher and adult education in Ireland (Murtagh 2014), standing alongside the Catholic Church as the dominant provider of primary and second level schooling in Ireland (Coolahan 1981). This article focuses on further education during this second stage, analyzing the impact of recent policy and sectoral shifts since 2000

for the philosophy, pedagogy and professional identity of contemporary Irish further education.

The vocational ethos of further education in Ireland - as elsewhere - has focused on the training of the working classes in particular (Anderson *et al.*, 2004). Brine (2006) notes a worrying shift in recent decades as key differences emerge between the so-called 'low skilled knowledge' and 'high knowledge skilled' workers. Further education works primarily with those positioned within the so-called 'low skilled knowledge' categories and higher education with the 'high skilled knowledge' workers. The different positioning, career destinies and the problematic terminology of low- and high skilled knowledge workers raises key questions about the social and class reproduction of further and higher education (Apple 2004, Baker *et al.* 2009, Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, Bourdieu 1998). The historic correlation of further education with the working classes and marginalized groups, and the lower level of status and recognition of further education relative to other education sectors has profound social justice consequences.

This correlation has been exacerbated by the current performativity and professionalism drive we explore below which has restricted the scope of further education to the so-called 'low skilled knowledge' work and hence its workers to the lower scales of the knowledge economy (Brine 2006). Clear gendered patterns are also evident in further education as the apprenticeship programmes (such as construction or carpentry) train a predominantly male student body. In the wake of the global economic crisis and collapse of the Irish construction industry, these male-dominated apprenticeship training programmes have been decimated, with a huge concern about the further education and employment challenges for these workers (OECD 2010, p. 8). The Post-Leaving Certificate sector caters for a largely female student body in the 'feminised' occupations such as hairdressers, beauticians and child care (Watson *et al.* 2006, p. 8).

The organisation of further education in Ireland

In line with the ambiguity arising from definitions of further education, confusion also exists in the organizational structures of further education. It rests uneasily across the borders of second level and higher education, spanning levels 1-6 of the qualifications framework.⁴

Conroy and O’Leary describe a ‘perplexing myriad of funders are engaged with further, adult and community education’ (2007, p. 13). This stands in sharp contrast to the organisational system and substantial structural funding of primary, second level and higher education sectors by the Department of Education and Skills and Higher Education Authority respectively. This complexity of further education is reflected in its organisational structure where two distinct government departments – and logics – operate; the Department of Education and Skills (DES)⁵ and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE).⁶ It is echoed in the tensions between an education (learning) agenda and employment (training) agenda of these state departments. The education agenda of further education focuses on encouraging access and progression through the education system. Similar to the UK context, the employment agenda in Irish further education focused initially on vocational education and more recently on building employability for a knowledge economy (Gleeson *et al.* 2005, Hardiman 2012).

Structural confusion and overlaps between these government departments have resulted in a complex organizational structure. Further education operates in the second level education system, through Education Training Boards (formerly the Vocational Education Committee structures). The VEC and newer ETB structures are centralized and hierarchical in nature, following a linear line of command towards the CEO of local ETBs. Given this centrifugal bureaucratic structure and hierarchical ordering, further education has often been dependent on ‘commitment on the part of a particular CEO, VEC committee member, school principal or individual member of a school’s staff’ (O’Sullivan 2005, p. 518). This is often occurred within the broader structures, premises and culture of a second level VEC school, drawing on a differing set of educational logic and system. In other cases, further education is provided in the context of commercial providers and governed by commercial logic. Smaller numbers again are organized under community structures and shaped by a community education ethos (Connolly 2014). Consequently, further education has been heavily reliant on specific local logics of the school, community or industry sector, whilst also centrifugally influenced by state discourses, organization and funding structure.

The centralized power of state influence has been reinforced through the recent restructuring of further education through new statutory agencies of ETBs, Solas⁷ and the

associate web of interagency responsibilities. This occurred in response to accountability demands in the wake of scandal surrounding the previous statutory body FÁS. The public controversy over the excessive public spending at FÁS necessitated and legitimated reforms of the sector⁸. However, the nature and extent of these shifts has not been examined in depth. What knowledge and practices has been promoted and what has been negated in these reforms? While reform was needed, the type of performativity introduced has created another unquestioned reality of further education as the provider of training for employability in a new 'economy' of the future. The neo-liberal shift to a global marketplace in the light of these public sector reforms remains largely unquestioned in this transformation.

This is set within the broader political context of consensual politics and social partnership agreements between the main groups in Irish society which co-opted these groups into the processes of governance, through professionalism, negotiation and accountability (Coate and Mac Labhrainn 2008, Somers and Bradford 2006). The consequences for learners are profound, particularly the focus on individual responsibility for their own learning and capacity-building. It 'leads to an over-reliance on the individual rather than social movements as the agency of social change, and consequently, to an inadequate and false sense of emancipation.' (Inglis 1997, p. 6–7). It is allied with a streamlined approach of encouraging access for marginalized or 'risk' groups to certain routes and types of education (including further education) which discourage the sense of collective responsibility and empowerment.

This hegemonic shift is not completely unquestioned, as many within the further education sector and wider society question these changes. As Lynch *et al.* (2012) outline, some critiques emerge from existing key actors in the sector such as trade unions, community and education bodies. A strong line of protest has emerged from tutors and learners within the adult education and community development sectors⁹. In other cases, it has emerged from representative bodies in the area, especially from AONTAS (Irish National Adult Learning Organisation) and NALA (National Adult Literacy Agency).

Professional identity and pedagogy of further education

Tensions between the different foundations of further education are also evident in their professional identity, pedagogical approach and student body. Further education students differ from second and higher level students as they are typically non-traditional¹⁰, interested in vocational education and accessing education in alternative ways. Consequently, their education requires a philosophical and pedagogical approach that is closer to the participative and learner-centered ethos nurtured by adult and community education (Murray *et al.* 2014). For instance, the Irish representative bodies AONTAS and NALA both promote a learner-centred ethos and a focus on the experiential knowledge of tutors at the heart of their lobbying for the further education sector. The linear rigidity of progression within the formal education sector from primary, second towards higher education level does not match these students' need for alternative progression routes and flexible, learner-centred approaches. Further education effectively spans the latter stages of second level and the initial stages of higher education offering alternatives to this hierarchical formal education track. This flexibility is a crucial part of the social justice ethos of further education, highlighting the philosophical rationale for its unique position and organisational structure in Irish education.

Adult education and further education cater for a diverse and often marginalised group of learners. Hence these sectors need to be responsive and inclusive of a student-centred approach, creating alternative pathways in education. However, the structural tension inherent in this remains unresolved as further education 'offer[s] a non-traditional pathway to a traditional provision; and a student-centered preparation for a subject-centered enterprise'. (Metcalf cited in Dearing 1997) The need for systemic flexibility and alternative pathways required for non-traditional students is difficult to provide within the rigid hierarchies of provision framed by a second level logic. A 'subject-centered' enterprise driven by externally determined curriculum content and learning outcomes - as evident in the second level approach - stands in contrast to the student-centred pedagogy of many adult and further educators. The implications for the knowledge basis and professional identity of further educators is explored below, acknowledging that professionalism 'operates as an occupational strategy, defining entry and negotiating the power and rewards due to expertise, and as an organizational strategy, shaping the patterns of power, place and relationships around which organizations are coordinated' (Clarke and Newman

1997: 7). Stronach *et al.* (2002: 117) understanding of 'the professional as mobilizing a complex of occasional identifications in response to shifting contexts' is adopted, noting the importance of developing 'theories of professionalism to hold on to these notes of ambivalence and contradiction' (2002: 121).

The further education sector is staffed by tutors with high levels of vocational and experiential knowledge as practitioners, rather than formal teaching or other academic qualifications. The practitioner emphasis is typical of adult and community education professional identity rather than the formal schooling or higher education sectors where professional qualifications are valued. Staff in further education tend to come through two distinct tracks – the initial teacher education route where they trained as teachers in the second level system or an employment track where they worked in industry before moving into further education (Robson 1998, Hardiman 2012). These dual pathways into the profession create tensions as the 'unique biographies, broken careers, deflections and diversions (of many further educators) are all passed over in favour of the singular and progressive sense of a cognitively conceived vertical and linear-based career progression.' (Gleeson and Knights 2006, p. 282). The status of these different routes to becoming a further educator is very significant (Robson 1998, Colley *et al.* 2007). Staff recruited directly from industry to teach with practical experience of a vocational area are greatly valued by the institution and students; often more than a pedagogical contribution. This is similar to the first wave of professionalism in the UK where Gleeson and Mardle (1980) describe the significance of the former trade and occupational identities of further education practitioners.

This privileging of the employment agenda has important implications for pedagogy and knowledge base of further education which still tends to favour a vocational and practice-based orientation. While many of these staff have now attained additional education training, most do not have specific training in the pedagogy of adults and tend to define themselves in terms of their industrial and subject basis rather than their education approach. This is significant given the adult education orientation discussed earlier. Structurally, the lack of formal recognition for experiential and practice-based knowledge results in less secure working conditions and status for those working in the sector. Further

education staff are often employed on casual and temporary contracts with poor entitlements, which contributes to the low status and insecurity of the sector (Colley *et al.* 2007, Dhillon 2011, Jeffers 2012). As Gleeson *et al.* point out, while 'part-time and contractual work offers a flexible response to market fluctuations it also increases distinctions between core and periphery practitioners with knock-on effects in terms of pay, pension and conditions of service. '(2005, p. 450)

All of these elements combine to ensure that further education is 'not only marginal to the hierarchy of professions, but also lack a well-bounded, unifying culture... Moreover, issues of pedagogy and professional autonomy have been an "absent presence" in this sector.' (Colley *et al.* 2007, p. 176) This stands in contrast to primary, second level or higher education sectors; which maintain a clear professional structure, working conditions and pay scales, secure funding and governance structure, centralized curriculum and accreditation systems, strong representative bodies and a clear process for public recognition of their staff as teaching professionals.

How further education performs? The demands of a global neo-liberal reform agenda

Given this lack of structure in comparison to other sectors, a key question in education policy and governance has been how to capture the performance of further education? What learning occurs for individual learners and for society? In the Irish context, this has been filtered through a labour activation discourse as further education is asked to contribute to the employability of the labour force, especially that of disadvantaged groups. This is set within the wider demands of performativity, new managerialism and global neo-liberalism (Apple 2004, Lynch *et al.* 2012, Power *et al.* 2013). As Sachs (2001, p.151-2) outlines, managerial discourses contend 'that efficient management can solve any problem; and that practices which are appropriate for the conduct of private sector enterprises can also be applied to the public sector.' Such market-orientated discourses and employability targets have refined the Irish further education agenda from a broad vocational ethos to a targeted performativity model of training for employability. In this sense, performance measurement becomes pervasive; driven by a culture of performativity that infuses and drives all aspects of educational policy and practice. The specific orientation of this

discourse of performativity emphasizes labour activation – a readiness to work rather than actually becoming employed. Performativity, in this sense, is

a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as a measure of productivity or output or displays of ‘quality’. (Ball 2006, p. 144).

This distilling of learning into measurable outputs or displays of quality disguises the question of why and who is making these judgments about what learning is measured and how quality and outcomes are being defined. As Ball reminds us ‘The issue of who controls the field of judgment is crucial. One key issue of the current educational reform movement may be seen as struggles over the control of the field of judgment and its values, (2006, p. 144).

These external forces come not only from statutory sectors but are driven by commercial forces in many cases (Lynch *et al.* 2012, Lynch and Moran 2006). For example, in the further education sector, many private providers operate including EDEXCEL awarding body, a main awarding body for NQAI certified qualifications (NFQ Levels 1-9) in Irish further education which is owned by Pearson PLC, the international media and education company)¹¹. The expansion of a commercial orientation in education has been widely critiqued for its narrow emphasis on profitability and the economic value of people as workers and consumers (Hughes and Tight 1995, Lynch 2010). The commercial discourse holds enormous potency through the austerity discourse that currently guides government policy and public belief, particularly resonant in a time of uncertainty, risk and recession. (Lynch *et al.* 2012, Power *et al.* 2013).

Many public agencies including ETBs now tender to provide educational services to employers and hence have to compete within the structures and priorities of their commercial competitors. Burke (2007, p. 3) contends that this has driven an ‘almost unstoppable trend towards thinking largely in quantitative terms about teaching/learning...and the utilization of business language and concepts in education

debates and policy documents'. Outcomes-based systems were first introduced in Irish further education to increase employability based on standards that could be validated with transparent procedures to ensure quality at national and international level. While transparency and quality were welcomed, what remained unquestioned were the perspectives and elements of education that were being measured and valued – and equally what was rendered invisible and not valued? What was recognized as legitimate knowledge and who were the accredited 'knowers' and purveyors of this knowledge?

The focus on operational definitions in policymaking directs attention towards educational outcomes rather than processes; training rather than learning, and clients rather than learners. Similar has occurred in the UK since 2001 with the introduction of the 'national learning and skills strategy, reinforced by audit and inspection regimes, through which standards of FE provision are promoted, judged and assessed' (Gleeson *et al.* 2005, p. 447). While the pervasive nature of inspection regimes that have been experienced in the UK since then are not yet evident in Irish further education, these recent reforms seem to lay the groundwork for this audit and performativity culture. Outcomes-based systems tend to privilege employer perspectives and as such acts as a mechanism for social power (Wheelahan 2009, p. 203), where societal inequalities based for instance on social class or gender, become accepted, legitimated and inherently form part of the outcomes too (as evident in the earlier description of the social class and gendered profile of further education students).

Learning outcomes are often separated from the processes of learning. The focus is on outcomes that the learner can produce rather than on what they have learned or how this applied to their life (Clarke *et al.* 2000, Lynch *et al.* 2012). This has significant implications for the kind of teaching and learning that occurs as it emphasises individual achievement, products and performance rather the communal, politicised and participative processes of learning emphasised in adult learning theories (Freire 1972, Jarvis 1995). As Deakin-Crick and Joldersma (2007, p. 83) point out this 'accountability move has profoundly reshaped the curriculum, the character of teaching and the nature of learning by markedly narrowing what constitutes knowledge, teaching and learning.' In the Irish case, the debate over 'fetacisation'¹² illustrates this, with further educators and learners alike struggling to

capture their experiences in FETAC (the Further Education and Training Awards Council) awarding system of learning outcomes.

Performativity has evolved throughout ongoing debate over recognition of awards in the Republic of Ireland. Certification in further education was offered by National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) established in 1991. This did not cover the diversity of provision in the further education field, so many providers offered certification from UK and other bodies (such as EDEXCEL's BTEA awards mentioned earlier). The National Framework Qualifications (NFQ) simplified this process by introducing 'a single, nationally and internationally accepted entity through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards' (Tierney and Clarke 2007, p. 132). FETAC had responsibility for making awards from levels 1 to 6 on NFQ, while HETAC was responsible for awards at higher education level. In 2012 Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established as the single awarding national agency, also monitoring standards and quality of teaching programmes.

This formalizing of educational outcomes into these qualifications structures has placed enormous pressures on further education students and staff who struggle to capture the complexity of learning into these measurable performance categories (O'Neill *et al.* 2014). This is part of the inherent structural tension as non-traditional experiential knowledge is slotted into a traditional structure of provision; and student-centered learning experiences are set within a subject-centered approach (Dearing 1997). The onus on accessing and matching personal learning to the system requirements is left to the individual student or staff to achieve, rather than the system matching learner needs. This shift to performativity is further consolidated by the State's adoption of standards of professionalism for the further education teaching staff to which we now turn.

Professionalism in Irish further education

The State plays a key role in re-constituting the professional status of further educators through educational legislation and policies. In recent years, some level of professionalism

has been welcomed within the field of further education, given the impact of casualisation, low status, pay and conditions of further education staff in Ireland (Jeffers 2012) and the UK (Foster 2005, Colley *et al.* 2007). However, the specific type of professionalism being encouraged has important consequences for learning, knowledge and staff conditions within further education. As Ball *et al.* (2012, p. 3) tell us, 'Policies rarely tell you exactly what to do, they rarely dictate or determine practice, but some more than others narrow the range of creative responses.' This narrowing of the range of creative responses in the translation from policy to action is crucial for further education. How performativity and professionalism are translated from policy into action often remains subjective and opaque (Taylor 2002).

As with other sectors of education, professionalism is often associated with 'technical expertise' rather than any other forms of knowledge (Schön 1996, p. 29). The designated holders of instrumental and technical expertise (particular outcomes) in a given profession are awarded a status in society which reflects the dominant ideological interests of society (Collins 1996, Gramsci 1971). This 'alliance between the state, professions and capital' described by Hughes and Tight (1995, p. 297) demonstrates the power of political and economic status quo. Gleeson and Knight (2006) and Avis (2003) describe how public professionals increasingly are governed by licenced autonomy and positioned as 'trusted public servants than empowered individuals' (Avis 2003, p. 329). It is evident in the Teaching Council's accreditation process for the Postgraduate Higher Diploma in Further Education, the professional registration requirement for further education teachers introduced in 2013.

Similar to the UK and other jurisdictions where this has been experienced since the early 2000s, the Irish Teaching Council focus on particular types of 'professional practice'. This knowledge base tends to be defined according to existing professional standards for second level teaching qualifications, disregarding further education's distinctive student profile, knowledge and pedagogy, as also occurred in the UK (Bathmaker and Avis 2005). On an empirical level, adult and further education colleges submitting programmes for Teaching Council accreditation are asked to legitimate their content and pedagogy from a second level orientation. This raises concerns as 'changes in the form and content of initial teacher education will, in the long run, serve to construct a new generation of teachers with

different forms of knowledge, different skills and different professional values' (Furlong *et al.* 2000, p. 6).

Further education providers find themselves defending the relevance of an adult and further education pedagogy during the accreditation process¹³. This defence, as experienced by NUIM, rests on curriculum and pedagogical aspects rather than a fundamental engagement with further education philosophy. The focus is on measurable teacher-outcomes and a second level initial teacher education (ITE) orientation, with the participatory learning, equality issues and critical thinking that is distinctive to adult and further education rendered invisible. For example, learners' reality remain in the background, as illustrated by the decontextualized sense of pedagogy and learning evident in the Teaching Council's requirements for teaching, learning and assessment outcomes, which encourage further educators to apply 'his or her knowledge of learners' backgrounds, identities, experiences and learning modes to his/her teaching, insofar as he/she is aware of these' (Teaching Council 2011, p. 14). This assumes an unproblematic application of pedagogy to learners' reality, which ignores the classed and gendered structures constraining many further education students.

The restructuring of further education professionalism along similar lines to second level ITE raises key pedagogical issues, with particular types of educational knowledge being privileged such as an expert teacher- rather than a learner-orientated approach. Curriculum content was also judged by such standards, with questioning about the inclusion of a specific module on gender studies in the Postgraduate Higher Diploma in Further Education. This invisibility of gender equality issues reflects the normative acceptance of gender inequality in the highly feminized profession of teaching and masculine mode of senior management in the schooling sectors (Drudy 2008, Smith 2011, Lynch *et al.* 2012). Given the earlier discussion of the gendered nature of participation in further education by students and staff, this is obviously still a pertinent social justice issue for further education to consider.

Performativity has further divided the formal and informal processes of learning, with the formal learning processes being recognised and accredited, while informal learning that is at

the heart of further education is more difficult to fit within the performativity radar of learning outcomes. The low status and recognition given to experiential knowledge is at the heart of much of adult and further education – what Schön (1996) calls the ‘tacit’ or ‘implicit’ knowledge of everyday life. The learner orientation that is promoted focused on consultation rather than learner participation and control over their own curriculum and learning processes. Tacit, experiential and affective knowledge that is associated with the private sphere is disregarded in favour of the political, economic and technical knowledge that dominates the public sphere. (Grummell 2007, Lynch 2010)

Conclusion: the impact of employability, performativity and professionalism in further education

The area of further education in the Republic of Ireland, has historically, been something of a grey area in terms of policy and governance. It is a sector of education which has consistently evaded definition (except possibly in the negative) and where its administration and organizational structure has been fragmented and its philosophical and pedagogical basis stretched between second level and adult education approaches. However, in recent times, its perceived importance as a mechanism for primarily labour activation purposes has been at the forefront of government policy and has carried many implications for other areas of education. Nowhere is this radical repositioning more evident than at the policy level. In 2000, the government White Paper on adult, community and further education firmly positioned further education and training within the context of adult and community education and was an integral part of a ‘lifewide’ commitment in the development of an Adult Education system. (2000, p. 84). More recently, the Department of Education and Skills states that ‘adult education and training’ should be aimed at ‘upskilling and reskilling people who are unemployed’, where providing ‘skills for work is a priority.’¹⁴ . This has been framed with a managerialist discourse of employability, performativity and professionalism that has profoundly changed the nature of Irish further education.

This article has set out to trace how the advent of such change impacts on policy, practice and learning in further education. While, in one sense, change was inevitable for this area of education – for instance, while the 2000 government White Paper called for formal recognition of qualifications for adult educators (2000, p. 151), many of the changes

introduced in the intervening years, it can be argued, are geared more towards economic activities (and by extension, the interests of economic elites) rather than in the interests of the needs of either practitioners or learners. Much of this change is associated with the wholesale adoption of managerial discourses that have seen the introduction of a model of performativity and professionalisation which favours a narrow definition of technical expertise, knowledge and professional practice to the detriment of a more critical pedagogical approach to learning.

Our analysis of Irish further education highlights the need for a situated view of professional knowledge that is located in the micropolitics and culture of its setting, reflecting a 'recurrent set of unstable conditions, in a variety of localized circumstances' (Gleeson and Knights 2006, p. 283). Further education in the Irish context is not only stretched across different education sectors in terms of the historical evolution of the field, acting in the sectors of second level, postcompulsory and higher education, but is now stretched in terms of demands of employability, performativity and professionalism that do not easily fit with the learning culture, knowledge base, pedagogy and structures of further education. Lynch *et al.* (2012, p. 14, p. 22) highlights the devastating consequences for education

In a market-led system, the student is defined as an economic maximiser, governed by self-interest... The State's role is one of facilitator and enabler of the consumer and market-led citizen... The focus is the product not the person, both in terms of what is attained and what is counted and countable. A culture of carelessness is created.

An economic drive towards employability is combined with the performativity and professionalism processes to narrow the scope of knowledge and learning in further education. This filtering effect drains the social justice, caring and transformative possibilities of further education which are core to its ethos.

Previously, the practice of adult and further education in the Republic of Ireland was very much framed in terms of meeting the needs of learners from diverse and often marginalised backgrounds. As a consequence, a pedagogical approach which emphasised a sociological analysis of power, equality and social justice assumed central importance. This, we argue, is now contested by a strong discourse that prioritizes outcomes as measures of productivity

and employment readiness. While the working conditions and professional status of tutors continues to be problematic within this new regime, workers must now also contend with increasing encroachment by commercial and private sector influences into their already precarious working environments.

This article has also sought to argue that performativity, defined in the narrow sense of requirements for economic activity and evident in displays of 'quality', now takes precedence over a critical, participative process for both tutors and learners. This has a direct link to the kind of knowing that is now prioritized in further education, where experiential knowledge and its associate usefulness to learners must now compete with externally predefined learning outcomes. Practitioners increasingly find themselves having to have to justify the use of pedagogical approaches that do not immediately conform to this performativity discourse.

These profound changes to adult and further education, of course, cannot be seen in isolation to the shadow of austerity that has permeated Irish society in recent years. We would strongly argue that the implications for such change are not limited to learning environments, but will continue to be felt in terms of societal inequalities. This echoes Brine's (2006) assertion that EU policy in this area (which is reflected in Irish policy) is effectively creating the conditions for a two-tier system of higher and lower skilled workers, where those most marginalised face a future of classed, gendered and often insecure employment (2006 p. 661). This final point is crucial for those practitioners concerned with promoting equality and social justice agendas and is evident in resistance towards the recent policy changes which is now occurring at both local and institutional levels.

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Notes

¹ <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1999/en/act/pub/0026/sec0002.html>; accessed 4 June 2013

² <http://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Further-Education-Training/>; accessed 31 May 2013

³ <http://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Legislation/Further-Education-and-Training-Bill-2013.pdf>; accessed 20 July 2014.

⁴ The National Qualifications Framework offers a range of qualifications across second level, further and higher education in Ireland from level 1 certificates to level 10 doctoral awards (<http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/>; accessed 18 July 2014).

⁵ The Department of Education and Skills is responsible for the Education Training Boards (formerly VEC) which provide further education, as well as primary and second level education, with the Higher Education Authority responsible for the higher education sector.

⁶ DETE delivered further education through Foras Áiseanna Saothar (FÁS), the National Employment and Training authority established in 1967 as ANCO to provide vocational training for employment mainly through apprenticeships (now SOLAS operating under DES).

⁷ Solas (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna) was established in 2013 to develop, fund and coordinate training and further education programmes. (<http://www.solas.ie/about.aspx>; accessed 18 July 2014).

⁸ Public and political controversy over the excessive spending in FÁS arose following newspaper investigations in 2008-9 (<http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/how-the-fas-scandal-unfolded-26569297.html>; accessed 18 July 2014).

⁹ Protests against government cuts in community development sectors include the Communities Against Cuts campaign (<http://www.cwc.ie/2012/11/communities-against-cuts-pre-budget-protest/>; accessed 24th October 2013), as well as a host of protests against cutbacks in the mental health, special needs, disability, family support and other social inclusion and equality groups since 2008.

¹⁰ The European Lifelong Learning Project Report (2009) 'Access and Retention: the experience of non-traditional learners in Higher Education' 2008-2010 (RANLHE) (defines 'non-traditional' as students who are under-represented in HE and whose participation is constrained by structural factors: including students from low income families, first generation entrants, students from (particular) minority ethnic groups, students with disabilities and mature students. (http://www.dsw.edu.pl/fileadmin/www-ranlhe/files/MerrillGonzalezMonteagudo_ICERI2010_finalpaper.pdf; accessed 28 June 2013).

¹¹ <http://www.edexcel.com/international/europe/Pages/ireland.aspx>.

¹² 'Fetacisation' is an informal term used by many further educators referring to the impact of performance measurement imposed by the FETAC system (Further Education and Training Awards Council whose awarding system is the precursor to QQI). 'Fetacisation' has also permeated the research agenda through the work of postgraduate researchers whose work exploring the impact of performativity on professional practice and student learning (see McDermott 2010, McGlynn 2012, Fitzsimons and O'Neill in Murray *et al.* 2014).

¹³ Professional accreditation of further education ITE programmes are now required by the Teaching Council since 2013. Available at: <http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/initial-teacher-education-ite/professional-accreditation-of-further-education-ite-programmes.1066.html> (accessed July 2014).

¹⁴ Available at: www.education.ie (accessed 9 May, 2013).