

The Role of Middle Managers in Land-Based Further Education

Catherine Lloyd

University College London

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Declaration

I, Catherine Lloyd, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Catherine Lloyd

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Abstract

This study explores the role of middle managers within specialist land-based provision. Middle management is currently under researched within further education and relatively little is known about the role in specialist settings. The study was influenced by the current context within the sector and the need for colleges to become more efficient whilst still meeting the needs of their local communities. This has led to a growing interest in new models of leadership which will enable them to meet current and future challenges. A qualitative study was undertaken and empirical data gathered through 12 semi-structured interviews with middle managers across a variety of land-based subject areas. The managers were asked to describe their role from a range of perspectives with a focus on leadership and management. Whilst they were able to articulate the differences between leadership and management from a theoretical standpoint, it was much harder to separate them in their daily practices. Most considered their role to combine aspects of both, with an emphasis on management. The findings indicate that although the participants were reluctant to identify themselves as leaders, they were clearly undertaking leadership activities as part of their role. They faced similar challenges to those in other educational environments such as a lack of role clarity and role overload. 'Management by walking about' was central to the experiences of those managing vocational areas which included large physical resources such as farms or animal centres. Despite the current context and continued influence of managerialism the participants remained positive about the sector and their role. The research raises issues around how leadership is viewed and enacted and suggests that identifying leadership as a practice, rather than as located within designated individuals, would redefine the contribution made by the managers.

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Glossary of Abbreviations

AoC	Association of Colleges
BELMAS	British Education, Management, Administration and Leadership Society
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CEL	Centre for Excellence in Leadership
DBIS	Department of Business, Innovation and Skills
EdD	Doctorate in Education
ELMAG	Excellence in Leadership, Management and Governance
ETF	Education and Training Foundation
FE	Further Education
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
FETL	Further Education Trust for Leadership
HE	Higher Education
LANDEX	Land-Based Colleges Aspiring to Excellence
LSIS	Learning and Skills Improvement Service
MEd	Master in Education
NPM	New Public Management
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
QIA	Quality Improvement Agency
SET	Society for Education and Training
SLC	Subject Learning Coach
SLT	Senior Leadership Team

Reflective Statement

I have worked in the Further Education (FE) sector within land-based education for 20 years and have held a position as a middle manager for the last 12. Following the completion of a MEd in 2006 I wanted to continue to develop my intellectual skills and the EdD seemed an ideal way to do this. I have been fortunate that throughout the five period of the EdD that my job role, despite developing and expanding, has remained similar and aligns well with my research interests.

Prior to starting the EdD I had become interested in the leadership and management aspects of my role as it had moved away from a focus on pedagogical issues. I was under pressure to develop, manage and lead a high performing team and was aware of an increased focus on measurement and audits of performance which were largely data driven. I had long been interested in how teams work together and this had led me to Lave and Wengers' work on communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In addition I felt that my own role lacked clarity in terms of leadership and management and I started to question the traditional hierarchical structure with the heroic leader that was often seen in the sector. This led me to explore models of leadership that were shared or distributed throughout an organisation. I combined these two interests together in the first piece of writing I did as part of the application process for the EdD. This was a research proposal which posed the question whether distributed leadership within communities of practice was a model that could be used to improve organisational performance. This led to my being accepted onto the programme.

Foundations of Professionalism provided an excellent introduction to study at doctoral level. Whilst the topic was not directly linked to my research interest, I wrote a piece entitled 'The past, present and future of professionalism in the FE sector'. This was timely as it coincided with the rise and subsequent demise of the Institute for Learning¹ and helped me understand the issues within the sector

¹ The Institute for Learning was an independent practitioner-led professional body for all teachers and trainers in the education and training sector. It operated between 2002 and 2014 and when it closed transferred its legacy to the Society for Education and Training.

from a much wider perspective. I was also able to explore the concept of dual professionalism and relate this to my own identity as a professional. I could see that moving into a management post had taken me further from my vocational background although I still retained an interest in it. However I felt that my professionalism now came from the study of education and undertaking the EdD strengthened this position.

For Methods of Enquiry 1 and Methods of Enquiry 2 (MOE) I was able to move back to my initial research interests. I planned and carried out a piece of research entitled 'The role of communities of practice in identity formation in lecturers new to Further Education'. The research involved conducting interviews with a small number of lecturing staff to explore how the communities of practice they had encountered on joining FE had influenced the development of their professional identity as a lecturer. Whilst the research did produce some interesting information I was not able to answer the research question that I had set. This was because the communities of practice appeared to be weak and fragmented and it was hard to ascertain whether they had any influence on individual professional development. I learnt at that stage the negative impact that can result when you allow your assumptions and beliefs to influence your research. I had assumed that all departments would operate in a similar way to my own, when in fact there were clearly multiple ways of operating influenced by a range of factors. I began to see that communities of practice do not necessarily arise organically out of collaboration and joint practice and it may be necessary to actively develop professional learning communities (Stoll *et al.*, 2006) with a shared vision and clear goal.

At this stage therefore I felt that I needed to reframe my approach for the Institution Focused Study (IFS), rather than assuming all teams and departments operated as communities, I would try and identify what opportunities existed in my organisation for collaboration and sharing of practice amongst lecturers. I was also interested in how the organisation could promote, enable and sustain the practice of lecturers working together and the role that college leaders could play in promoting this.

I had struggled during MOE 1 and MOE 2 with articulating the ontological and epistemological aspects of my work and identified with the description by Brook *et al.* (2010, p. 662) of being 'lost amid concepts and frameworks and structures'. This is an area I developed during the IFS ensuring that there was a clear link between my theoretical perspective and methodology. Whilst I used my own organisation for this study I experienced being both an insider and an outsider in the research process as I interviewed staff across multiple sites many of whom I had never met before. Both the MOE 2 and the IFS gave me the opportunity to develop my skills as an interviewer and in analysing transcripts. This improved my confidence and approach when it came to conducting the interviews for the thesis and meant I was able to effectively use software in my analysis of the data.

During the data collection for the IFS I met and interviewed an advanced practitioner within the college. After the interview we discussed the fact that they were also undertaking post graduate research. We both enjoyed meeting and discussing our research and it led us to wonder whether there were any others in the college undertaking research. Researching FE from within appeared to be an underground movement and we wanted to bring people together to meet, share and support each other in the process. Following our discussion we set up a research network and advertised the first meeting throughout the college. This has resulted in a small group of staff getting together regularly and has enabled us to establish our own community of practice. The network has provided a critical space within which we can develop our identity as researchers, discuss our research and become more confident in challenging each other's views and assumptions. This has been invaluable in helping me develop my own identity as a researcher. Initially I lacked confidence and my emerging researcher identity was easily threatened by setbacks or issues experienced with my research. However in common with Brook *et al.* (2010) I found that as I became more situated in the community I began to see my identity take shape.

As a group we began to identify ways in which we could get our voices heard by a wider audience and this led to four members having papers accepted for presentation at the Research in Post Compulsory Education's 2nd International Conference held at Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford. I presented the results of my IFS study entitled 'Better Together?' An investigation into how

teaching practice is shared and developed within a general FE college'. Although extremely daunting the presentation went well and it was a useful learning experience. In addition I am currently writing a paper with the co-founder of the research network concerning the experiences we have had in establishing the group. Within this we explore the challenges of developing an identity as a researcher within a non-traditional setting, that of an FE college and the difficulties of finding and developing a voice within the wider academic community. I feel strongly that it is important for the sector to nurture and grow research on FE by those working within FE. Doel (2017) believes that building intellectual capital within FE will enable the sector to play an active role in determining its future and I agree with this view. A key part of this is bringing people together, sharing knowledge and building research capacity. There appears to be a shift towards this currently within the sector which I have participated in through attending networks, conferences and events. I believe the sector needs to develop its own research identity, authoring its own voice from within.

Moving forward to the thesis I decided to focus on my other key area of interest, leadership and management within FE. I felt that the communities of practice aspect was difficult to progress due to the weak and fragmented nature of the communities I had encountered. I had several years' experience in middle management in the sector and this led me to select this as the focus of my research. I was aware that researchers often choose their research project as the result of several years of experience working with the issues (Drake, 2010) and that this could lead to over-familiarity with the context and setting (Mercer, 2007). Therefore I took care not to assume that my own perspective was widespread within the sector. I read and researched extensively on leadership and management within the sector including models of leadership that were collaborative, shared and distributed. There appeared to be a lack of research on middle management within the FE sector particularly around their views on leadership and management. This led me to formulate my research questions which focused on the role of the middle manager, the settings and context in which they work and their views on leadership and management. My reading of the literature also deepened my knowledge and understanding of the sector,

including the impact of new public management². Before undertaking the study I had not fully realised the effects of new public management; however doing the research involved my taking a step back and observing the sector as though from an outsider's perspective. This was useful as it caused me to reflect on and analyse my own practice from a different viewpoint. Throughout the EdD I have become increasingly reflexive about my own practice and I believe that this has enabled me to make informed judgements and better decisions in my work as a middle manager.

At the start of the thesis my views on leadership and management were fairly narrow and I initially held what I now see as fairly conventional views. I tended to view each as being intrinsically linked with a person and their position in the organisation and my understanding of shared and collaborative forms of leadership was in its infancy. However after five years and a considerable amount of research and reflection I feel I have come full circle and am in a position to begin to answer the question I set out in my application proposal, about how leadership could be distributed and enacted within communities of practice. The findings from my thesis along with my reading of the literature, has developed my thinking from a focus on leadership as person to one of leadership as practice. I have come to see leadership as a behaviour rather than a role definition (Harris, 2004) enmeshed in social practice rather than a clear cut definite figure (Wood, 2005). I have discovered new ways of thinking about the terms 'leadership' and 'leader' which involves a shift from hierarchical to shared practices of leading (Wilkinson and Kemmis, 2015). Whilst I recognise that middle managers in FE are reluctant to acknowledge their identity as leaders, I believe that focusing on leadership as practice presents opportunities to reframe the contribution these managers make to the organisation.

Taken holistically all the component parts of the EdD have contributed to my professional development and knowledge. I have already begun to consider how I might continue my research interests into middle management and leadership within the sector once I have completed the EdD. I hope that the connections I

² New public management is an approach to running public service organisations using a set of practices drawn from the private sector. These include increased use of markets and competition and a focus on performance and outputs.

have made through attending special interest groups for BERA and BELMAS will present opportunities for this. In addition I will continue to support the work of the research network within my own college encouraging and supporting others to undertake research projects, developing our research community.

CHAPTER 1 Background to the Thesis

1.1 Introduction and rationale for the study

The Further Education (FE) sector has undergone five major reorganisations during the last two decades (Panchamia, 2014) as successive Governments try to address the issues of how to drive long term improvements in skills and employment. Since the 1980s there have been numerous pieces of legislation relating to the sector, resulting in a situation where providers have had to cope with endless change (Jephcote, Salisbury and Rees, 2008) and perpetually reinvent themselves in the light of the latest policy (Smith and O'Leary, 2013). A situation which has been referred to by Keep (2006, p. 47) as policy-makers 'playing with the biggest train set in the world'. In 2007 Edward *et al.* (2007, p. 155) wrote that 'few would dispute that the learning and skills sector in England is undergoing a phase of extreme turbulence'; however this could just as easily be applied to the current situation ten years later.

This constant change in the sector means that leaders face a daunting set of challenges. A survey of college leaders in 2016 found that creating an agile organisation that is able to anticipate change and react appropriately to it is considered an essential factor in a college's future success (Feldman, 2016). The Leadership Conversation Project undertaken by the Education and Training Foundation (2014) identified a clear sense of urgency about the need to future proof the sector in terms of developing its leaders for a challenging tomorrow. Segal (2015 no pagination) believes that it is a good sign that the issues of leadership and management in the FE and Skills sector have a much higher profile now than ever before, stating that 'it's probably because in these challenging times the sector will need leaders to think about what is required in both the short and long term'. This focus on leaders could be taken to mean college Principals, however Principals are not the only leaders in a college so ways of thinking about how leadership is dispersed are important (Gurr and Drysdale, 2013). Despite this much of the current educational leadership and management research within the FE sector is concentrated on senior leadership (Page, 2011a).

In 2008 a report on growing leadership talent in further education by the Learning Consultancy Partnership stated that 'it is now time to focus on middle and evolving leaders so they will be ready, willing and able to take on the challenges of the future and meet the targets set in the Leitch review for 2020' (LCP, 2008, p. 5). However in contrast with the schools sector where there is now a clear and welcome consensus about the importance of middle leadership (Cladingbowl, 2013), currently there is still relatively little research available on the work of middle managers within Further Education (Busher, Hammersley-Fletcher and Turner, 2007). According to Briggs (2001) middle managers are the 'key brokers' within an organisation and could provide the key to organisational change. Collinson (2007, p. 2) agrees stating:

Not only are middle managers the senior leaders of tomorrow, but they are also strategically important in their current role of managing, leading and implementing organisational improvement programmes.

To understand the role of the middle manager in further education and the apparent need to secure organisational improvement it is necessary to consider the context and current situation within the sector in more detail.

1.2 Contextual setting of the study

The Further Education sector in England comprises a wide range of different providers including general FE colleges and specialist colleges. In September 2016 there were 325 colleges in England comprising 209 general FE colleges, 90 sixth forms, 14 land-based colleges, ten specialist designated colleges and two Art, Design and Performing Arts Colleges employing around 127,000 full time equivalent staff (AoC, 2016b). Approximately four million people participate as students in the FE sector each year (NAO, 2015). The Government believes that the sector is critical to their strategy of raising productivity and economic growth as set out in their productivity plan (HMT, 2015). FE's special focus is on providing a link between school and work – supporting people to gain the vocational qualifications and skills they need to secure and progress in employment or learning (DBIS, 2014). This is not their only role, as an increasing number of FE colleges are now providing higher education (HE) courses. In 2012 it was

estimated that in the region of 250 colleges were providing HE to approximately 175,000 students (Parry et al., 2012). The sector however remains the 'educational Other to schools and universities' (Page, 2011b, p. 101) constantly wrestling to maintain a distinct identity.

This is summed up by Porter and Simons (2015, p. 36):

The FE system, or the skills system is bewilderingly complex in comparison to other education sectors. This reflects both the wider breadth of responsibilities which fall on it, the political changes which have been made to it with extreme frequency, and the funding environment which has required it to constantly change and adapt.

In 2005 Sir Andrew Foster described FE as the 'neglected middle child' of the British education system located between schools (youngest) and Higher Education (oldest), pointing out that it is often undeservedly neglected in favour of the other two (Foster, 2005, p. 48). It has also been referred to as the 'Cinderella sector' with its implied negative connotations, a term the sector has been trying to shake off for decades. More recently, and perhaps in light of its history, there has been a shift away from the term 'further education sector' to the broader 'learning and skills sector' to encompass all types of post 16 education and training. In addition vocational education, often considered as low value or of inferior status compared to academic routes (McCrone, 2014) has been rebranded 'technical and professional' education in recent Government publications on the sector. McCrone (2015) welcomes this attempt to change attitudes but believes that greater clarity about what professional and technical education means and how it differs from, relates to, or builds on vocational education is required.

The Government's current austerity measures have led to the sector facing its biggest challenge for over a decade as budgets are cut and individuals and employers are required to pay more towards training (Buttle, 2010). In the period 2010 to 2015 the FE budget reduced by approximately 25% (Keep, 2014) with further cuts likely to occur. This has resulted in the withdrawal of funding from adult education and training, and a shift in focus to promoting and providing apprenticeships. Despite the current interest in high quality technical and professional education from across the political spectrum, the fact remains that the sector is under significant pressures with ongoing uncertainties, for example

over the devolution of adult skills funding from 2017-18. As a result, leaders and managers in the sector face new challenges in providing and managing a curriculum offer that meets the needs of the local community whilst taking account of significant budget cuts.

A report from the National Audit Office (NAO, 2015) showed that the financial health of the FE sector has been declining since 2010-11 and almost half of colleges were in deficit in 2013-14. The Skills Funding Agency, responsible for monitoring financial health, anticipates that the number of colleges it rates as financially inadequate will continue to grow. In response to this the Department for Education working jointly with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, have facilitated a programme of post-16 area based reviews to provide opportunities for institutions to restructure their provision to meet the changing context and achieve maximum impact. The aim is to ensure institutions are financially stable and able to deliver high quality provision, stating 'we will need to move towards fewer, often larger, more resilient and efficient providers' (DBIS, 2015b, p. 3). In response, colleges will need to review their structures, leadership roles and responsibilities to ensure they have the right skills and expertise in place to meet the current and future challenges faced by the sector (Justice, 2011).

These challenges are many and varied; in their work on FE college governance Hill, James and Forrest (2016, p. 79) identify ten key challenges which they consider to be 'significant, substantial, simultaneous and synergistic' relating to the turbulent nature of the FE sector, the need to secure improvements in learner outcomes and the cost of resourcing provision. There is constant pressure to secure consistently high performance in terms of retention, attendance, recruitment and success not just on the learners' main qualification but also in English and maths. In addition Colleges must actively ensure the safeguarding of learners through promotion of the equality act and compliance with the prevent duty³ agenda. Within the sector there has been a reduction in standards as judged by Ofsted (Ofsted, 2016) with the number of good and outstanding colleges declining, placing an imperative on the need to generate and sustain

³ The prevent duty is part of the Government's overall counter-terrorism strategy to reduce the threat to the UK by stopping people from being drawn into terrorism.

organisational improvement. These combined challenges require senior teams to demonstrate effective and robust leadership and management skills. Graystone (2015, p. 26) in a recent review of FE Governance stated 'tough times lie ahead for further education'. Questions have been raised about how FE colleges can be led, changed and improved within such an unstable environment (Elliott, 2015).

Having briefly considered the wider FE sector to provide background and context for the study, information will now be presented on specialist land-based provision which was selected as the setting for the research.

1.3 Land-based Further Education

One type of Specialist College is that traditionally known as agricultural and horticultural colleges now usually referred to as land-based. Land-based providers in England offer a range of education and training courses for the land-based and environmental sector. These industries, which employ 3% of the UK's workforce, are divided into three clusters; land management and production; environmental industries; and animal health and welfare (LANTRA, 2015). Whilst there has been a reduction of 33% in the number of colleges across the FE sector as a whole since 1993, land-based colleges have been particularly affected. In 1993 at the time of incorporation⁴ there were 36 independent specialist land-based colleges, as of 2015 there were 14, the rest having merged with General Further Education Colleges or Higher Education Institutes, a reduction of 61%. For many of these colleges the merger was essential to improve both financial stability and quality of provision. The current programme of post 16 area reviews is likely to lead to more mergers, with the Association of Colleges (AoC) predicting that whilst 2016 will be a record year for English college mergers, 2017 may see even more (AoC, 2016a).

The majority of colleges with land-based provision (both specialist and general FE) are members of LANDEX (Land-based colleges aspiring to excellence). This

⁴ Incorporation was a result of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which granted colleges' independent corporate status.

organisation represents colleges, communicating with government, sector skills councils, funding agencies and others to help them understand the unique set of issues that impacts on its members (Landex, 2014). In addition it has a specific quality improvement agenda through a peer review process amongst member colleges. Land-based industries are regarded as increasingly significant in areas such as food shortages, food security and environmental sustainability (Taylor, 2012). Self-sufficiency in food production in the UK has reduced by 20% since the mid-1980s and currently only 60% of food consumed in the UK is grown here (Harvey, 2015). Looking to the future the industry will need to focus more on science and technology to ensure compliance with legislative, technological and climate change needs meaning that new entrants to the sector will require high level technical and professional skills (Lantra, 2014). A report in 2012 found that the sector (agriculture, forestry and fisheries) had relatively more hard to fill and skill shortage vacancies as a percentage of overall vacancies compared with the economy as a whole (Breuer, 2012). The sector is characterised by an aging workforce and needs to attract more young people; employment predictions forecast that 595,000 new entrants will be needed between now and 2020 (Lantra, 2014). In 2007 HEFCE acknowledged that at 40%, the land-based sector had a greater proportion of HE delivered in FE than any other sector (Brighton and Port, 2007) providing an important regional resource and widening opportunities for young people to access higher education.

Land-based colleges are often in rural settings and have large estates, farms, animal collections and equestrian centres that provide the breadth of practical resources needed to develop skills for employment. In many cases they may once have formed part of a large country estate and often retain assets such as a large period country house. They may also run commercial enterprises such as garden centres, livery stables and dog grooming parlours. In 2014 Landex members managed over 12,000 hectares of educational campus which included 10,000 hectares of farmed land (Landex, 2014). In comparison with many other subject areas it is evident that land-based education requires large and diverse physical resources which are expensive to provide and maintain. In the light of these factors such courses attract increased funding through a specialist programme weighting. This ensures colleges can continue to support students

training in land-based subjects and allows shortage areas such as agriculture to benefit from skilled young people in future (Evans, 2014).

As well as the traditional subjects of agriculture and horticulture, the sector subject area includes study for qualifications in environmental conservation; countryside and wildlife management; floristry; arboriculture; equine studies and animal care, collectively these subject areas are referred to as land-based provision. A review of land-based provision among Landex members in 2014 found that they enrolled over 29,500 full time and 23,200 part time land-based students (Landex, 2014). Courses range from entry level and foundation learning, through level 2 and 3, to foundation degree provision. There is also a wide range of apprenticeships being delivered with over 10,300 apprentices and 5,700 higher apprentices registered in 2014 (Landex, 2014). Learners may also be studying English and maths GCSE and undertaking activities such as work experience to fulfil the requirements of the study programme regulations (DfE, 2016). The nature of land-based provision means that middle managers will not only be responsible for the curriculum but may also oversee the running of a large practical resource required to deliver that curriculum. This often involves working closely with and line managing for example, the yard, animal centre or farm manager. Caring for animals and plants must be done daily, meaning that land-based centres operate 52 weeks per year and need to take into account the time and staffing commitment which that involves.

The views and experiences of the managers will be influenced both by the wider FE context and by the specialist settings in which they work. Land-based education has a particular set of challenges around resource provision and management and this could have an impact on how the managers carry out their roles. Having explored the current context within both the FE sector and specialist land-based education, I will next explain how my own background has influenced the choice of study.

1.4 Personal and professional context

I have extensive experience of teaching and managing within the FE sector, which has been gained working in colleges delivering land-based education since 1996. Initially focusing on the equine sector my remit has now widened to incorporate animal care and management. I have been a middle manager for the past 12 years and this has raised my awareness of the issues surrounding middle management. I began the EdD in 2012 as I felt this would enable me to explore some of the issues relevant to both my personal and professional development. I selected 'Leadership and Learning in Educational Organisations' for the initial specialist course in 2013 as part of the EdD programme. This course provided the opportunity to hear contributions on a range of leadership issues from experts, academics and researchers. These were both stimulating and challenging, causing me to reflect on my own practice, that of my organisation and on the FE sector in general.

By 2015 the impact of the Government's austerity measures was evident within the FE sector, resulting in a need to review structures and roles to address the challenges colleges faced. I felt that there was an intensification of the situation described by Govindji and Linley (2008, p. 18):

People are being asked to do more with less, to build partnerships both more broadly and more deeply, to take on and execute a much wider repertoire of administrative and financial responsibilities, simultaneously with creating exceptional educational climates where individual students can flourish, develop and become the best that they are capable of becoming.

The 'people' in this quote refers to college leaders but could just as easily be applied to middle managers. I started to question whether my own role was one of management or leadership within the organisation and felt there was a lack of clarity which I wanted to explore. As a result my research interests in middle managers progressed further into the leadership and management aspects of the role and reviewing the literature introduced me to models of leadership that are distributed, collaborative and shared within organisations. Through reading articles and blogs I became aware that there was a need to think about leadership and the future of the FE sector. I attended the inaugural meeting of the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) in 2015 and was particularly interested in

discussions around new models of leadership for the sector. Through attending research conferences I was able to discuss my ideas with others currently researching in the area of further education. I spoke to a number of middle managers about their roles which highlighted both frustrations and positives of middle management and the impact of the current situation within the sector. I discovered that despite a growing interest in leadership in the sector, the research regarding middle managers within further education appeared to be relatively sparse, a view supported by Barker (2007). As a result of my professional background, my personal interest and the apparent lack of research in this area, I therefore selected middle management for the focus of the thesis.

1.5 Research questions

This thesis investigates the role of the middle manager in land-based provision within the FE sector with a focus on their views on leadership and management. It explores the requirements of the role and how it is enacted on a day to day basis and seeks to discover the impact of the current situation within the sector. It aims to identify whether the role is viewed predominantly as one of management or leadership. It also hopes to establish whether or not the middle managers are aiming to progress to senior leadership positions.

The research questions are therefore:

- How do middle managers of land-based provision view their role in the organisation?
- What impact do the changing priorities within the sector have on their role?
- How do they define and enact leadership and management in their role?
- What are their perceptions of progression to senior leadership and management roles within the sector?

The four research questions are broad and designed to provide an insight into the role of the middle manager within land-based sector. It is intended that the research will contribute to the literature on middle management within further education and in particular specialist land-based provision. It has been informed both by my own experiences and by my reading of the literature. Comparisons

will be drawn between the role as described in the literature and the findings of this study within the land-based sector. This research is important as many authors believe that FE is a significantly under-researched sector (Gleeson, Davies and Wheeler, 2005; James and Biesta, 2007). This current lack of research specifically within the land-based sector does provide opportunity for originality in this study.

1.6 Structure of the thesis

This first chapter of the thesis has set out the background and context of the study, reflecting briefly on the current situation within the FE sector and specifically on land-based provision to inform the research. Information on personal and professional contexts has helped to explain the rationale for the study. Chapter one concluded by presenting the research questions and explaining the structure of the thesis.

Chapter two reviews published literature relevant to the research questions and focuses on the period from incorporation in 1993 to the time of the research (2016-17). The key themes emerging from the literature are summarised in a conceptual diagram which has been used to structure the review. Part A provides further information about the background and context, whilst Part B considers how the changes that have taken place in the sector have influenced leadership and management. This includes identification of who the middle managers are and how their role has changed and developed. The terms leader and manager are considered and related to the practices of those in the middle of the organisation. Issues around personal development and career progression are also briefly reviewed. To conclude this chapter, I explain how the findings of the literature review influenced the development of the research questions.

Chapter three explains the theoretical and methodological approach to the study. It begins by considering social constructionism, the interpretive paradigm and the inductive approach and their application to the research. Consideration of researcher positioning as both insider and outsider and the implications of this for the study are presented. The methodology is explained including methods of

data collection, the sampling strategy used and the development of the interview schedule. Issues around gaining access to participants and the interview process are presented and the process of data analysis is described. It concludes by considering issues of validity and generalisability and the ethical implications of the study and how these were addressed.

Chapter four presents the findings of the interviews undertaken between July and September 2016 with the 12 middle managers in the land-based sector. It begins by exploring what led the managers to their current positions within their organisations. The roles undertaken by the managers are presented and the similarity in the tasks and functions undertaken are identified. The impact of recent policy initiatives and strategies are considered along with the managers' response to these. The data analysis highlights the differences between the managers' experiences, in particular those between new and experienced middle managers. In asking the managers to reflect on how their role is viewed by others in the organisation issues around 'middleness' are described. This leads on to an exploration of the middle managers' views on leadership and management and how they enact these as part of their role. It concludes with the participants' views on career progression and whether they are considering moving to senior leadership roles.

Chapter five discusses the findings from the 12 interviews and relates these to the existing body of literature reviewed in Chapter two. It begins by setting the study in context by providing a brief description of the situation within the FE sector during the summer of 2016 when the interviews were conducted. This is followed by a reflection on the positive attitudes of the managers in the survey which in view of the context may not have been expected. A number of key themes are identified and explored. These include: development of the role and work intensification, issues around the management of staff and resources; policy influence and involvement with strategy; and views on leadership and management. The chapter ends by considering the managers' aspirations for progression to senior leadership roles, noting the lack of research on this within the literature. The summary highlights the key points emerging from the discussion.

Chapter six, the final chapter, concludes the study by considering how far the findings are able to answer the research questions set. A number of recommendations arising from the findings are presented and opportunities for further studies are identified. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the contribution the study makes to the literature.

CHAPTER 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The literature was searched primarily using electronic databases which provided access to e-journals. Once a number of relevant papers had been identified these led me to explore other key concepts and areas relevant to the topic, expanding the search. In addition material was drawn from a wide range of books on both the FE sector and on leadership and management. Current information has been obtained from newspaper articles, websites, online blogs and think pieces. A relatively large number of articles relating to the FE sector and its management in the mid-1990s were identified, which is likely to be as a result of studies undertaken to examine the changes that occurred in the sector following incorporation. More recently in the literature, middle managers, particularly within further education appear to be somewhat neglected. Work by Ann Briggs published between 2001 and 2007 and later by Damien Page from 2010 to 2015 explore the role within an FE setting and have been useful sources to draw on. There were also a number of articles on developing middle leaders in the sector from the CEL/LSIS research programme which ran between 2006 and 2009.

Over recent decades it has been noted that the discourse has moved from management to leadership and by 2000 there had been a shift from solo to distributed forms of leadership reported by Crawford (2012) in a review of 40 years of the *Education Management, Administration and Leadership* journal. Wherever possible the focus has been on studies and research directly focused on the FE sector. However where appropriate literature from the compulsory schools and HE sectors and business contexts have been used to expand understanding or provide comparisons.

During the review of the literature several key themes emerged and these have been summarised as a conceptual framework (figure 2.1), and used to structure the chapter.

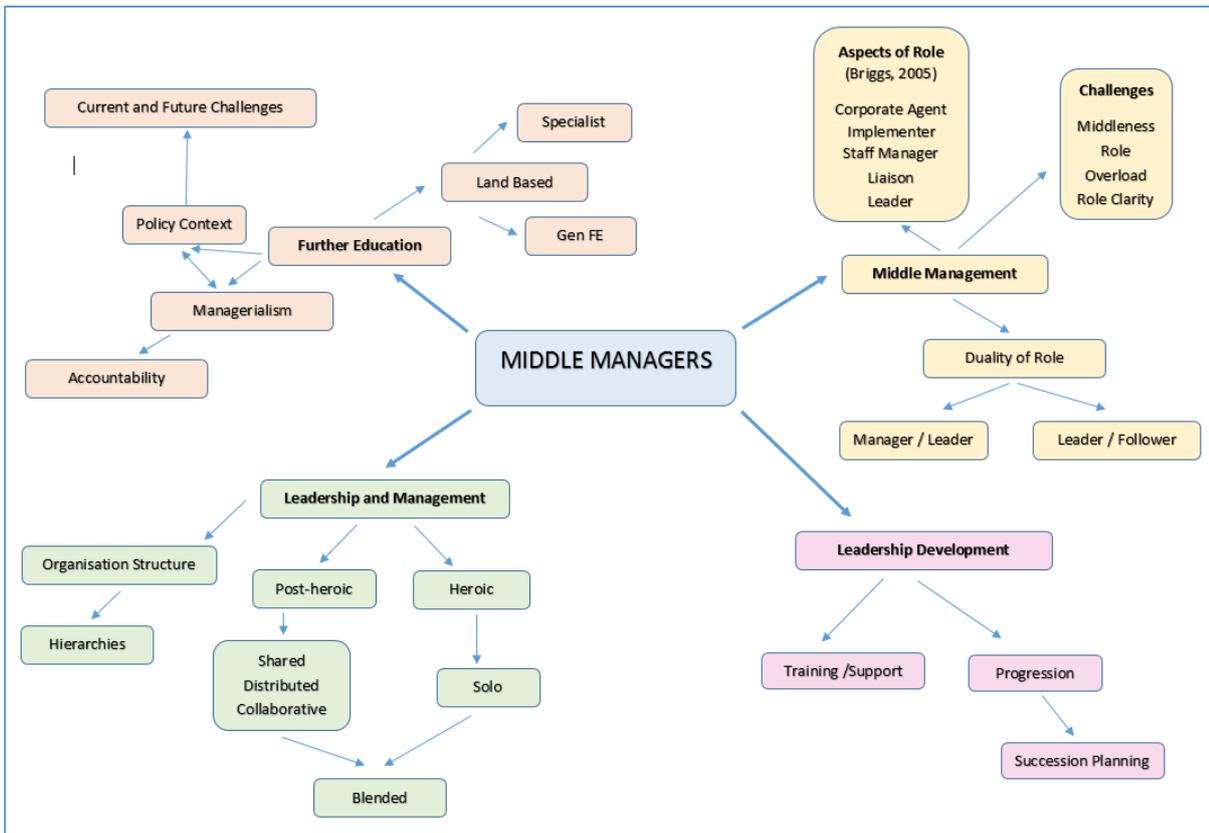


Figure 2.1 Conceptual framework for the literature review

The literature review is divided into two sections. Part A provides information on the background and current context within the sector relevant to the study. It begins by briefly considering the external influences on the sector in the past 24 years since incorporation on 1st April 1993. This includes a discussion of managerialism and its impact on working practices in the sector up to the time of the study. The current situation within the sector is presented including political and economic factors. Current and future challenges are identified, for example, austerity measures and post-16 area reviews. This is shown in the top left of the diagram.

Part B of the literature review examines leadership and management in the sector against this backdrop. This begins with an exploration of heroic and post-heroic models of leadership including those which are collaborative, distributed or shared in nature and includes consideration of ‘blended’ leadership (Collinson and Collinson, 2009) which draws on aspects of both models. Key to this study are discussions around the differences and similarities identified in the literature between leadership and management. These are explored in relation to middle

managers in further education and considered alongside findings from empirical studies in the sector. The impact of organisation structures are reviewed including degrees of hierarchy and how this influences the role. This section includes consideration of the terms 'leader' and 'manager' and how they are used both within the sector and the literature to inform the study. This can be seen in the bottom left of the diagram.

The review then considers who the middle managers are and despite the many contradictions in the literature, attempts to define the responsibilities and parameters of the role, using the role aspects described by Briggs (2005). These appear to be more managerial in function and focus on planning, implementing and monitoring tasks. Management of staff and resources and liaison with others are also identified as key parts of the role. An exploration of how the role has changed and developed in the past two decades is undertaken, and links drawn between this and managerialism discussed in the previous section. In addition the issues around duality of role both as leader and follower, and manager and leader are explored. This can be seen in the top right of the diagram.

The section concludes by considering progression issues for middle managers in further education as set out in the literature. Whilst detailed exploration of this area is outside the scope of this study, it is useful to reflect on the support and training available and the routes from middle to senior leadership. This section draws links between the training and development available and the calls in the sector for new models and approaches to leadership to enable colleges to meet the current and future challenges described in Part A. Throughout the review links are drawn between the areas shown in the diagram exploring how they influence and impact on each other.

2.2 Part A: Background to the sector

There is much agreement that the culture within further education colleges has metamorphosed since 1993 (Simkins and Lumby, 2002) and that this change has been driven by Government policy. A key turning point in the history of FE colleges was the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which divided the post-compulsory education sector into three parts, further education colleges, work

based training, and adult and community learning. This act granted colleges' independent corporate status and they became corporations governed by non-elected boards. The same Act saw the creation of the Further Education Funding Council for England (FEFC) whose role it was to distribute funding to colleges based on them fulfilling performance targets (Randle and Brady, 1997). This act attempted to introduce competition into the FE sector, creating a 'quasi-market' economy (Goddard-Patel and Whitehead, 2000). Referred to as the 'economising of education' by Gleeson and Shain (1999a, p. 548) it aligned the public sector more closely with the culture and beliefs of the private sector, legitimising new forms of management and managerial control.

Incorporation was seen by many observers as part of the New Public Management (NPM) agenda to drive up efficiency and effectiveness within the sector. The aim was to improve public services through changing the way they operated so they became more 'business-like' (Diefenbach, 2009). This pressure on institutions to be more cost effective, productive and efficient required a change in management (Scott, 1989). This led to a rise in Managerialism within the FE sector (Elliott and Crossley, 1997; Hartley, 1997; Randle and Brady, 1997). Managerialism comprises a set of management techniques which focus on extensive use of quantitative performance indicators to provide economy, efficiency and effectiveness in public services (Metcalf and Richards, 1987). Within Further Education there was a shift in the sources of power away from that which derives from professional expertise towards a greater use of formal authority and coercive forms of power (Lumby and Tomlinson, 2000). The reality was that FE colleges became controlled by central government through the FEFC's funding mechanisms (Gleeson and Shain, 1999b).

The change in funding, post incorporation, was at the core of transformation across the sector where funding was inextricably linked to retention, achievement and success. This has enabled successive Governments to enforce a raft of policies and initiatives on the sector through the use of funding incentives and disincentives (Smith and O'Leary, 2013). This continues today with, for example, the Government's current drive to increase the number of apprenticeships (DBIS,

2015a). It has been argued that further education is subject to more statutory regulation than any other education sector in England (Dale and James, 2015).

The centralization of college services and systems, such as learning support, quality assurance and academic tutoring, have been marked features of FE in recent years in order to ensure that these services look attractive to learners and guarantee consistency of practice (Spours, Coffield and Gregson, 2007). This has also brought FE more into line with commercial sector organisational structures (Harper 2000). There has also been a marked increase in the use of business terms and job titles to describe the roles of management staff (such as 'chief executive' and 'directors'). Harper's (2000) study of the structure of further education colleges post incorporation noted the increase in the number of second tier managers responsible for key support functions. These posts were created in response to the need to adapt to external demands and involved recruiting those with specialist business experience in areas such as income generation, enterprise and quality (Leader 2004). This led to the emergence of a more entrepreneurial and managerial style of leadership than is usually found in the rest of the education sector (Iszatt-White *et al.*, 2011), with a 'proliferation of managers who made bureaucratic, mechanistic demands on lecturers in order to satisfy the new systems of accountability' (Briggs, 2006, p. 9). Research by Seddon (1997) found that compared to their predecessors teachers post incorporation were more subject to managerial regulation, less autonomous and self-regulating and less involved with educational decision making.

With the rise of NPM and subsequent push towards managerialism (Clarke and Newman, 1997), came a raft of systems and processes for auditing colleges' performance; these included among others management information systems, quality standards, benchmarking, inspections, league tables and performance reviews (Diefenbach, 2009). Smith and O'Leary (2013) use the term managerialist positivism to describe the current situation where the production and presentation of quantitative data to represent college activities has become accepted as normal practice. Activities need to be measurable and robust, covering everything from lesson observation to funding allocations. Organisations and by default the individuals' within them, are constantly required to produce

data for internal and external audits, inspections and for use in marketing. This allows performance to be measured and compared within and between organisations. Ball (2003, p. 216), writing about the education sector generally, draws together three aspects of education reform; the market, managerialism and performativity:

Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic).

This results in a situation where managers exert much greater control over practices previously left to teachers' professional judgement (Hall, 2013). In reviewing the literature on professionalism Dhillon *et al.* (2011, p. 68) found that teachers' professionalism in FE was presented as 'prescribed, narrow and lacking in human agency while being heavily shaped by performance targets and a new bureaucratic accountability'. Much has been made of the disputes between managers and professionals that characterized the early days of incorporation, highlighted, for example, by Randle and Brady (1997). They talk of two conflicting paradigms, the professional, concerned for the learner, and the managerial, concerned for the business. Diefenbach (2009) explains that whilst the managerial / instrumental view caused problems for private sector organisations as new layers of bureaucracy and measurement systems created additional workload, it turned into a nightmare for those in the public sector whose organisations were based more on values and ethical and professional concepts. Reflecting on this period, Lynch (2014, p. 6) describes the rise in managerialist forms of governance as 'antithetical to the caring that is at the heart of good education'.

However six years after incorporation Gleeson and Shain (1999b) put forward the view that the two concepts (professional and managerial) were not necessarily in opposition, and that coherence exists between both interests, allowing middle managers to take on extended work roles in the search for efficiency and effective pedagogy. Some argue that the role middle managers played in 'shielding' tutors and learners from some of the policy changes highlights their growing strategic role in colleges during this time (Leader, 2004). Certainly middle managers did

not attract the same degree of hostility as those in senior positions providing a bridge between lecturing and senior staff (Lumby, 2003). Bottery (1996) writing about the implications of NPM for teaching professionals, observed that those promoted to management had either begun to develop or had been selected because they already possessed the characteristics of NPM managers and this may have helped to provide a link between professional and managerial cultures.

The term 'strategic compliance' was used by (Gleeson and Shain, 1999b) to describe the responses of many managers to the new managerialist culture following incorporation who tried to reconcile managerial and professional interests. These strategic compliers were able to devise strategies for dealing with the managerialist aspects of their work whilst at the same time retaining their commitments to professional and educational values. Coffield *et al.* (2008, p. 150) believe that whilst strategic compliance continues, it has changed from:

...a struggle between tutors and manager to a struggle between institutions and the system, in which all parties within institutions and within the wider LSS find themselves under pressure from accountability and politically driven changes in priorities.

It is now 24 years since incorporation, and looking back over this period it is clear that the power of central Government has increased very significantly and that the pace and scale of change has been rapid (Keep, 2015). The sector is subject to 'almost continuous government reform' (Lucas, Nasta and Rogers, 2012, p. 677) requiring college leaders and managers to rapidly respond to changing demands and priorities. Smith and O'Leary (2013) believe that staff have become accustomed to this constant policy change and that it is now a recognizable and distinctive feature of the FE sector. Colleges have had to adapt to these changing demands, often through restructuring, a process which has become a defining feature of FE since incorporation (Smith, 2014). Departments are merged, created or removed in response to policy change and strategic funding by Government to better serve the needs of local industry.

Simmons (2008) acknowledges that it is easy to look back at the pre-incorporation period through rose-tinted glasses. However, the sector pre-incorporation was not problem free, issues had been identified with student retention and success and with poor financial management (Lucas and Crowther, 2016). The quality of provision was highly variable and was later criticised as having been inflexible and unresponsive. There was a need for change and this was influenced by the belief of the Government at the time that colleges should compete in an education and training market. This combined with a new funding system and process of auditing, aimed to address concerns about quality. There is evidence that competition between colleges and the drive to increase recruitment had a positive impact on the student experience. Colleges became more responsive to their needs through improved advice and guidance, tracking systems and a focus on retention (Ainley and Bailey, 1997). Diefenbach (2009) considers that whilst new public management may have been introduced for good reasons, the overall impact has been negative, with those in middle management positions seeing an increase in the time and effort spent on gathering, interpreting and presenting data to demonstrate their areas in a favourable light. Lea and Simmons (2012) draw a strong link between this new corporate culture of FE and the accountability that this entails. Compliance with this managerialist agenda was more likely to be found in middle and senior managers as they are responsible for the success of the institution and under greater direct pressure from policy levers (Coffield *et al.*, 2008).

2.3 Part B: Leadership and management within the sector

Leadership and management within further education has changed considerably since incorporation in 1993, adapting and responding to rise of managerialism and policy changes within the sector. In 2001 Sawbridge reviewed the literature on leadership in Further Education and found that at the time although there were exceptions, leadership in FE colleges in the UK largely conformed to what he termed a managerial or functional leadership model. He also noted:

The leadership role is strongly associated with the team leader rather than any of the other team members and there is therefore an emphasis on leader training and skills development. Leadership behaviours are of secondary importance to leadership skills.

(Sawbridge, 2001, p. 9)

A transactional style of leadership involves motivating and directing followers using a system of rewards and punishment which are contingent upon performance. It describes more of a 'give and take' working relationship where rapport between leader and follower is established through exchange (Lai, 2011). The findings of the review carried out by Sawbridge (2001) are not unsurprising, as in the period preceding his review this transactional style of leadership was prevalent in response to the funding and inspection regimes led by the Government at the time. Also referred to as 'command and control' this style of management is still employed through target setting and performance management (Le Grand, 2009) within colleges.

What is not clear from the summary of the literature review is the size or scale of the work that was undertaken to inform these judgements. Sawbridge observed that there was little in the way of published research or evaluated practice to support effective leadership in FE (Sawbridge, 2000, p. 13). He identified a number of areas for further research which aimed to inform and improve leadership practices in colleges.

A later study by Lumby *et al.* (2005) of ten successful FE institutions involved gathering data from senior, middle and first line managers. They found that there was no single approach to leadership that prevailed across them all; in fact there was a mix of leadership styles including transactional, transformational and distributed in operation. A transformational style involves leaders motivating and empowering followers to be proactive through sharing a vision. The power of transformational leaders comes from their charisma and ability to inspire others to produce exceptional work (Bass, 1985). Within education, transformational leadership is widely advocated, however during his review of the literature on leadership in further education, Sawbridge (2001) found that in many colleges this kind of leadership was recognised as still being in its infancy. Wallace and

Gravells (2007) put forward the idea that transformational leadership is not an alternative to transactional leadership, rather it is a way of adding to its effectiveness.

In March 2015 Jim Krantz⁵ gave the inaugural lecture for the newly formed Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL). He explained that the commonly held view that leadership is exercised by individuals who influence others based on some combination of position and personal qualities may no longer serve us very well. He believes we are entering a time in which the rewards will go to organisations that figure out how to foster leadership throughout, those that do not rely on God-like leaders at the top (Krantz, 2015). However this view is not entirely new, in 2008, Haigh wrote that 'hero heads need to have the courage to let others have a go' explaining that leadership needs to pull off the difficult trick of definitely being in charge while at the same time setting people free to have ideas and take risks with them (Haigh, 2008 no pagination). A recent review of leadership in the FE sector reported that 'collaboration and using the knowledge and abilities of people at many levels in the system is important for the future – heroic single leaders are not enough' (Godfrey, 2015, p. 6). Powell (2001, p. 28) agrees, believing that 'traditional notions of the solitary heroic leader have led us to focus too much on the actors themselves and too little on the stage or context on which they play their part'. A heroic approach to leadership appears to exclude the possibility of leadership by teams or groups (Bolden, 2004). This model is often criticised because it over emphasizes the role of the head teacher and therefore tends to reinforce a hierarchical structure with a top down leadership style (Sawbridge, 2001). In addition the emphasis on this one role has the potential to place undue burden on a single individual whilst diminishing the potential of others (Nicholas and West-Burnham, 2016). Pearce and Conger (2002) comment that the public sector is trapped in practices that reflect and reinforce heroic conceptions of leadership. Much government policy has conceptualised leadership as something that an individual does - usually the principal - and there has been a failure to view the leadership of colleges more holistically (Lumby, 2003) and distributed more widely.

⁵ Jim Krantz PhD is founder of the American based WorkLab, a consultancy focusing on the areas of organisational change, leadership and the design of work for high performance.

Post-heroic theories assume that leadership can occur at various levels within an organisation and is best understood as an inherently social, collaborative and interdependent process (Collinson, 2007). This move away from solo leaders to shared models of leadership (and in particular distributed leadership) has had a major impact on the way in which we think about and understand leadership (Crawford, 2012). The concept of distributed leadership is a strongly emergent theme in educational literature (Iszatt-White *et al.*, 2011), and has according to Lumby (2013) become the theory of choice for many. It is presented as more democratic (Corrigan, 2013) involving the distribution of leadership at all levels within an organisation and the shared ownership of decisions. The assumption is that this distribution has the potential to build capacity within an organisation through the development of its staff (Camburn, Rowan and Taylor, 2003). It is concerned with the professional growth of others and this in turn can raise staff morale (Murphy, 2005) which is a positive factor in driving organisational change. Distributed leadership theory proposes that all individuals have the ability to lead and that expertise can be found across the many and not just the few, it 'concentrates on engaging expertise wherever it exists within the organization rather than seeking this only through formal position or role' (Harris, 2004, p. 13). This opens up the boundaries of leadership and removes the notion that it is linked to a position within the organisations hierarchy (Woods *et al.*, 2004). Proponents of distributed leadership believe it can play a role in improving organisational outcomes (Harris and Chapman, 2004) in part through building internal capacity for development (Harris, 2005b).

However according to Harris (2013) the term 'distributed leadership' is often misused, describing any form of shared or collaborative leadership practice. She goes on to say that 'distributed leadership means actively brokering, facilitating and supporting the leadership of others' (ibid, p. 457) requiring a change in how senior leaders view their leadership role. Lumby (2013) considers that the lack of attention given to issues around power and authority mean claims that distributed leadership opens up new opportunities for staff or empowers them are dubious stating; 'a more critical interpretation might suggest that teachers are freely undertaking an ever increasing workload' (ibid p. 587). Within a hierarchical structure distributed leadership can result in a downward flow which might not

reach the lower levels of the organisation (MacBeath, 2007) and in these circumstances it can be difficult to distinguish between distribution and delegation. Distributed leadership then becomes a distribution of operational responsibilities rather than a distribution of power (Lumby *et al.*, 2005) and this lack of authority can cause frustration when the expected freedom to manage does not materialise (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2015). Other critics warn that it could be used as a mechanism for delivering top down policies (Hargreaves and Fink, 2009), and that it can lead to competing leadership styles and conflicting targets, timescales and boundaries (Timperley, 2005). Corrigan (2013, p. 68) acknowledges these difficulties proposing that 'the inescapable organising principle is accountability through hierarchical power, and the appeal and hopeful language of distributed leadership does not change that reality'. He believes that this lack of focus on power and accountability is a persistent weakness in distributed leadership theory. This is supported by Bush and Middlewood (2013, p. 22) who found that 'the existing authority structure in schools and colleges provides a potential barrier to the successful introduction and implementation of distributed leadership'. In addition Hall (2013) considers that whilst discourses of leadership are concerned with the potential for leaders to shape and determine policies and practices within the context in which they work, in reality their role is concerned with implementing reforms, policies and strategies centrally determined by government. He believes that the introduction of distributed leadership into this context potentially magnifies these tensions by inviting not just senior leaders but all working within educational organisations into 'the agential imaginary of leadership' (Hall, 2013, p. 270).

Diamond and Spillane (2016) use distributed leadership as a conceptual framework for studying leadership and management. They focus on leadership practice not the people leading and consider that 'when we take leadership activity as the unit of analysis, we find multiple people participate in leading and managing' (Diamond and Spillane, 2016, p. 148). In this framework it is the interactions between people that are important, not the actions of an individual. They refer to this leadership practice as being 'stretched over' people. Gronn (2016) argues that leadership should be thought of as configured rather than distributed, describing the patterns or arrangements that encompass an

individual, individuals or collective sets of leading agents. However once again issues around power and influence come to the fore. Woods (2016) believes that it is necessary to analyse the different types of authority held by people within educational establishments to develop our understanding of how these play out in interactions between individuals with regard to leadership.

Between 2004 and 2006 Collinson and Collinson (2009) conducted research within the FE sector exploring perspectives on what constitutes effective leadership. Their study included seven FE colleges and 140 interviews and was funded by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership. They use the term 'blended leadership' which draws together aspects of both heroic and post-heroic perspectives to describe their findings. In this model aspects of heroic and post-heroic leadership are seen as being not only compatible but equally necessary for effective leadership. Participants in the study expressed a preference for 'both delegation and direction, both proximity and distance and both internal and external engagement' (Collinson and Collinson, 2009, p. 370). Blended leadership represents an approach which is both flexible and versatile, able to adapt and respond to changing circumstances within the challenging FE sector.

There are a number of other post-heroic theories of leadership. Nicholas and West-Burnham (2016) writing about leadership in the schools sector, put forward an alternative perspective where leadership is seen as a collective capacity and shared entitlement – leadership as a community resource. The view that leadership must be a shared, community undertaking and the professional work of everyone in the school (Lambert, 2002) also aims to bring about sustainable school (or college) improvement. This deliberate fostering of developmental leaders who act locally and beyond (Fullan, 2004) could result in more strategically focused capacity building (Davies and Davies, 2006) and help establish the institution as a learning organisation (Senge, 2006) or learning community.

Whatever approach is taken, it is clear that the ability to build leadership capacity is a key factor in an organisations ability to respond rapidly to the challenges currently faced by the sector. Harris (2013) believes that formal leaders who act alone will not be able to achieve this transformation: 'meeting the needs of the

21st century will require greater leadership capability and capacity than ever before within, between and across schools' (Harris, 2013, p. 551); this is also true of the FE sector.

In drawing this section together, it is evident that no one model of leadership pervades the whole of the FE sector; however recently the focus has shifted towards more collective approaches (Cox et al., 2010) and how leadership may be shared or distributed throughout organisations, moving away from the position of having a single heroic leader figure. The literature is conflicted on distributed leadership (Corrigan, 2013), whilst some claim that role of middle managers in managing, leading and effecting change and development in organisations is key to the notion of distributed leadership (Barker and Brewer, 2007), there are unresolved issues around agency and accountability (Hatcher, 2005). It is often presented as replacing previous forms of leadership, depicted as more effective because it is more inclusive (Lumby, 2013) however this is challenged by authors who believe that it is a mechanism to get staff to willingly commit to an increased workload (Hatcher, 2005; Youngs, 2009). It may be that the blended leadership described by Collinson and Collinson (2009) which draws together aspects of both heroic and post-heroic models is the most useful in categorising practice within the sector. What is clear is that in complex and challenging situations, the skills and experience of more a diverse group of people are necessary to create successful leadership (Hatcher, 2005). This presents opportunities for those in the middle of the organisation to get involved. Twenty years ago Klagge (1997) reflecting on the role of middle managers across all types of organisation wrote that there was a need for middle managers to redefine their place in modern organisations and that their unique niche could best be described as leadership from the middle. It is however still far from clear whether this niche has been established within FE colleges.

2.3.1 Middle management

Middle managers are a very diverse group of people within an organisation, who have been given some form of delegated responsibility for which they are directly accountable Turner (2007). Harding, Lee and Ford (2014) believe that there are

so many contradictory accounts of middle managers that trying to define who they are would be foolhardy. Research within the schools sector by Earley and Weindling (2004) found that the definition of middle management was not unproblematic as all teachers are managers in that they are responsible for the pupils and the management of the learning process; this argument could also be applied to the FE sector. There are a number of different terms used to describe those in the middle in educational organisations, such as programme manager, head of department, head of faculty, head of year and curriculum leader to name a few. There is also a huge variation in the size of department or area that an individual may manage. The process of becoming a curriculum middle manager inevitably changes the principal focus of an individual's role (from teacher to manager) (Barker and Brewer, 2007), with the potential for creating 'fragile identities' (Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Thompson and Wolstencroft (2015) refer to the inherent haziness of a role that straddles the twin demands of senior management and lecturers. This can account for the 'double identities' which FE middle managers report in their work (Gleeson and Shain, 1999b) which can be interpreted to mean both as a teacher and manager, and as a leader and follower. Busher (2005) notes a Janus like performance where those in the middle act on one side as advocates for departmental colleagues and on the other as agents for senior management. The difficult position of those in the middle is summarised by Leader (2004, p. 69):

Undoubtedly, tensions are created in the process of managing the expectations of senior managers who are empowered with corporate accountability and authority, against the demands of academic staff who frequently hold considerable knowledge and control at a team level.

Whilst there are many definitions for middle managers, one aspect that unites them is the reference to the position in a hierarchical organisation. They are usually responsible for supervising the work of groups of other people within an institution and have a middle role in the hierarchy between senior managers and teaching staff (Busher, Hammersley-Fletcher and Turner, 2007). Bennett (1995, p. 18) notes that the term middle management implies a hierarchical structure which 'assumes a downward flow of authority from the leader, given in order to promote what the leader seeks'. However in this structure they also play a key

role in passing information back up the line. According to Earley (1998) senior managers will rely heavily on middle managers to keep them informed about what is going on at the 'chalk face'. Middle managers have the tricky task of translating policy into practice referred to as 'acts of translation' by Spours, Coffield and Gregson (2007, p. 193), which must be done in ways which are acceptable and make sense to both senior managers and lecturers and reduces potential conflicts of interest and minimises the 'them and us' scenario (Gleeson and Shain, 1999b). In this 'go-between' role they frequently experience high degrees of ambiguity and ambivalence (Ainley and Bailey, 1997) as they inhabit differing and conflicting worlds, described by Gleeson and Shain (1999b, p. 469) as 'ambiguous territory'.

Although colleges' responses to the current funding cuts and constraints may mean a loss of management posts resulting in flatter structures, Lumby (2001) believes that some degree of bureaucratic hierarchy will always assert itself. Bush and Middlewood (2013, p. 63) found that organisations are almost always portrayed in terms of a vertical or pyramidal structure which they refer to as the 'pervasiveness of hierarchy'. It is the degree of hierarchy and its impact on distribution of leadership that is key. Overtly hierarchical structures, lack of clarity in what is expected of managers, and muddled lines of accountability may all stifle managers' appetite for behaving as leaders (CiPD, 2013). Flatter structures sometimes referred to as 'flatarchies' (Tomlinson, 1997, p. 96) can improve the flow of communication through creating a more open, democratic structure. However a flattening of hierarchical structures can also affect the positioning of middle managers within an organisation, eroding their traditional roles and functions (Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Many agree that team based, non-hierarchical structures are far more appropriate for a changing environment (Senge, 2006). This is supported by Powell (2001, p. 27) who considers that:

Traditional structures of colleges that focused on a hierarchy of jobs and tasks that need to be performed and directed are unlikely to have the capacity or the capabilities to generate the desired improvements in organisational performance.

Briggs (2001) believes that management cultures and structures which facilitate middle manager roles are central to the effectiveness of the whole college, since these are the role-holders who, on a day-to-day basis, make the business of the

college happen. They are crucial to the success of the organisation and have been referred to in studies of secondary schools as 'the boiler house', 'kingpins' (Bubb and Earley, 2007, p. 148) and 'the engine room' (Fletcher-Campbell, 2003, p. 4). They hold critical roles for engaging staff in change, securing consistently good performance and generating creative and adaptable solutions (Greany *et al.*, 2014) all of which are essential if colleges are to meet the current and future challenges within the sector.

2.3.2 The changing role of the middle manager

The role of middle managers has changed considerably over recent decades. Role can be defined as the expected patterns of behaviour associated with a particular position in an organisation (Mullins, 2016) in this case the middle manager in an FE college. During the 1980s and 1990s, the traditional role was that of a subject leader who had attained the role often because they were the most experienced teacher in the department and led by example (Bush, 2003). Whilst this role did involve administration of the department, research from the time shows that it was often not thought of as a managerial or leadership position (Earley and Fletcher-Campbell, 1989; Glover *et al.*, 1999). They were seen as a leader of their profession, that of teacher; rather than a manager in the middle of the organisation.

By the late 1990s there had been a move towards middle managers becoming accountable to senior managers for the quality of the work in their responsibility area. Incorporation and the new public management agenda focused attention on the role and activities of the managers within the organisation, with the 'managers' right to manage' becoming the new maxim (Gleeson and Shain, 1999b, p. 465). Whilst it has been suggested that managers are the major beneficiaries of new public management as it provides them with opportunities to increase their power, control and influence (Diefenbach, 2009), in the early years post incorporation many were uncomfortable with this level of accountability and the expectation that they would monitor their colleagues' work (Glover *et al.*, 1998). Brown and Rutherford (1999) found that heads of department in

secondary schools were more likely to see themselves as managers of the curriculum rather than of their colleagues. However over time this has altered and in further education in the UK, managers tended to move away from direct involvement in the curriculum as they took on more managerial responsibilities (Sawbridge, 2001). This was supported by (Briggs, 2005) who found that middle managers spent more of their working day dealing with tasks linked to income generation, accountability and administration than tasks relating to the pedagogical needs of their area. In many departments pedagogical needs are now addressed by an advanced practitioner, a teaching and learning coach or similar. This role specialises in teaching and learning and involves advising and supporting staff on teaching practice, leading development sessions and disseminating best practice; tasks previously within a head of department's remit.

Ball (2003, p. 219) discusses how the work of the manager now 'involves instilling the attitude and culture within which workers feel themselves accountable and at the same time committed or personally invested in the organisation'. This is partly achieved through the use of targets and incentives to improve the performance of both the employees and the organisation and through monitoring systems such as appraisals and performance reviews. However it has created a tension between the need to motivate, support and develop staff on the one hand and the need to monitor and evaluate performance on the other (Glover *et al.*, 1998), referred to as 'a complex duality of control and support' (Gleeson and Shain, 1999b, p. 462). The overall result has been that much greater control is now exerted over practices previously left to individual teachers' professional judgement (Hall, 2013).

The role of the middle manager will vary depending on what is being managed and there can be considerable variation between institutions and subject areas. Researching within the FE sector, Briggs (2005) identified five main aspects of the middle manager role: those of corporate agent, implementer, staff manager, liaison and leader. Busher and Harris (1999), drawing on work by Glover *et al.* (1998), identified four dimensions of a head of department's work; the way in which heads of department translate the perspectives and policies of senior staff into the practices of individual classrooms; how heads of department encourage

a group of staff to cohere and develop a group identity; improving staff and student performance and a liaison and representative role. Comparing the aspects (Briggs, 2005) and dimensions (Busher and Harris, 1999) there is considerable overlap, however there is no specific focus on leadership in the dimensions.

Considering Briggs (2005) five aspects in turn; corporate agents are responsible for translating policy into practice, implementing the strategy devised by the colleges' senior leaders, which in turn has been driven by central Government (Coffield *et al.*, 2008). This links to the role of implementer that of making things happen and to the translation of the perspectives and policies of senior staff into the practices of individual classrooms. The prime concern of middle managers has traditionally been with the successful implementation of the organisation's strategy rather than in its creation (Briggs, 2006; Earley, 1998). Glover *et al.* (1998, p. 286) see this as a key feature of the role:

The essential feature of 'middleness' appears to be that the subject leaders and others are translators and mediators rather than originators of the policy and culture of the school.

However whilst investigating leadership of school subject areas, Busher and Harris (1999) found that heads of departments' degree of involvement in strategic matters and organisational decision making varied according to three factors; the nature of the organisation, the management approach of senior staff, and the culture of the organisation. In addition the opportunity to contribute to the strategic direction of a school depends upon the willingness of the senior management team to establish procedures that involve the subject leaders (Glover *et al.*, 1999). Leader (2004) argues that middle managers can only operate effectively when there are defined parameters and an understanding of individual contributions to the strategic planning process. She goes on to say that: 'to participate in cogent strategy formulation managers need to be able to identify the complexities of strategic decision making' (Leader, 2004, p. 74). It has become increasingly clear that for organisations to survive in turbulent and changing environments, issues of strategy can no longer be seen as the exclusive preserve of senior staff (Earley, 1998; Field and Holden, 2013), however studies have shown that in FE, as in schools, middle managers are often preoccupied

with routine administration and crisis management and have little time for strategic thinking (Earley and Fletcher-Campbell, 1993).

As staff manager, the role-holder enables the team to collaborate and carry out their roles, encouraging them to cohere and develop a group identity thereby improving staff performance. Busher (2005) found that negotiating and interacting with colleagues lay at the core of middle managers' work and this was perceived by some as quite challenging. A study by Thompson and Wolstencroft (2015) found that a disproportionate amount of the manager's time was spent either providing emotional support to their staff or dissolving tensions resulting from changes in work roles and conditions. The impact that this has on the role can vary depending on the size of the subject area and the number of staff the manager is directly responsible for. However with the move towards larger departments and a corresponding reduction in the number of management staff these pressures are likely to increase.

The liaison aspect involves interacting with others within and outside the college and acting as a 'bridge' between senior managers and the team. This involves not only liaising with those above and below, but also across the organisation and this cross college communication is not without challenges. As Briggs (2006) suggests, middle managers in large FE colleges can face problems when trying to work together.

The combination of size of operation and multiplicity and distance of location offers logistical problems of communication and liaison between managers, and the need to maintain the same standard and procedures across a diverse organisation.

(Briggs, 2006, p. 8)

The constant pressure for achievement against goals can leave little time for democratic group negotiation, despite the desires of leaders to create a collaborative ethos (Jameson, 2007). Hannay and Ross (1999), writing about schools, describe the department middle manager structure as a black box of taken for granted givens and assumptions and believe that challenging this structure can increase whole school interaction and collaboration. Glover *et al.* (1998) found that most middle managers have no wish to go beyond their involvement in their own subject domain, as they are too busy to become more

involved in whole-school management whilst shouldering their current responsibilities. Research by Bennett *et al.* (2007) found that whilst collegiality may exist within a department this was often bounded by its location within the school's structure. This could lead to a strong sense of territory and development of department subcultures within a school resulting in tension between heads of department and between them and their senior team colleagues.

Finally, the last of the aspects is the leader dimension which Briggs (2005) considers to be problematical due to the fact that whilst middle managers show consistent evidence of leadership they are reluctant to call themselves leaders. This appears to be because they see their role as operational rather than strategic (Lumby, 2001). Prior to incorporation Earley and Fletcher-Campbell (1993) in their study of secondary schools, highlighted the tension between the wish of middle managers to lead and manage their area of activity, and the lack of time in which to undertake the work. It is clear from the literature that this situation continues today and middle managers often feel 'squeezed' from the top as senior managers pass down workload, as well as from the bottom, where middle managers felt they could not delegate this work to other lecturers (Clarke and Newman, 1997).

Roles consist of the behaviours and demands that are associated with the job an individual performs (Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll, 2001). Individuals generally seek to behave in a manner consistent with the way the role is defined, however conflicts such as role overload or role ambiguity can lead to role stress (Mullins, 2016). Role overload occurs when the manager feels that there are too many activities or responsibilities expected of them, which they are unable to complete due to lack of time, lack of resources or other constraints (Rizzo, House and Lirtzman, 1970). Briggs (2006) noted that sometimes managers have unrealistically heavy responsibilities for coordinating a range of functions. In addition in the years post incorporation many middle managers also retained heavy teaching commitments (Gleeson and Shain, 1999b) which further contributed to this overload. This reduces the time available to focus on the leadership aspects of the role as other more pressing aspects take precedence.

Alongside role overload, role ambiguity (also known as a lack of role clarity) can also impact on how the role is enacted. Lack of clarity occurs where the role holder does not know what to do either through lack of information or lack of understanding of how to comply (Briggs, 2006) and is unclear of the boundaries and parameters of the role (Page, 2011b). Research by Thompson and Wolstencroft (2015) highlighted managers' concerns related to role ambiguity whereby they did not have a full understanding of their own roles leading to a loss of identity and purpose. This was exacerbated by the context in which they worked: 'the almost constant upheaval resulting from changes within the sector seemed to generate a role that was at best ambiguous and at worst impossible' (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2015, p. 412). Bush and Middlewood (2013) also identify issues around role ambiguity; however on the positive side they note that this ambiguity allows an individual to shape and develop the role. The opaque nature of the position can yield high degrees of professional autonomy (Page, 2011b). The way senior staff work with their middle managers is crucial in relation to such matters as role clarity (Earley and Weindling, 2004). In common with findings from the secondary schools sector, the boundaries between roles are often highly porous (Davies, 2005) making it difficult to delineate them clearly (Irvine and Brundrett, 2016).

It is evident from reviewing the literature that the role has developed and evolved considerably since incorporation, moving further away from pedagogical issues towards managerial and administrative tasks, a move which has been influenced by new public management. Middle managers are accountable both to the senior staff and to the lecturers; as well as carrying individually the professional accountability for their own subject specialism (Briggs, 2003a).

2.3.3 Management or leadership?

Throughout this section the terms manager and leader have been cited as they occur in the literature depending on which have been employed by the researcher to reflect both the time period and the sector within which each piece of research was undertaken. When discussing the role in general terms the title *middle manager* will be employed. The majority of the references used have been drawn

from the FE sector to ensure relevance to the context and setting of the research, however a small number of other sources have been used to illustrate the arguments where required.

Recent studies in the secondary schools sector focus on middle leaders whereas many with the FE sector still use the term middle manager. In this setting the middle leader is often responsible for an area or department in which they have professional expertise as a subject specialist (Bennett *et al.*, 2003). Their main responsibility is the quality of the teaching, learning and assessment of that subject and the experience of the learners through promoting outstanding classroom practice (TeachingLeaders, 2016). Research by Reynolds, Tarleton and Kent (2008) found that greater improvements within schools could be achieved where staff were encouraged to see themselves as middle leaders and not middle managers. The Chief Inspector for Ofsted, when talking about schools, claimed that he hated the term middle manager as staff in that position were leaders of people and leaders of teaching (Wilshaw, 2014). Certainly in recent years the emphasis has changed with leadership rather than management as the dominant discourse (Earley and Weindling, 2004), this according to Bush (2008) is an attempt to rebrand the role.

The meaning of 'management' and 'leadership' can be the subject of endless, often circular debate (Hooper, 2001). Certainly in regard to education there has been significant discussion about the distinction between the terms 'leadership' and 'management' (Scotson, 2007). Glatter (1972, p. 5) believes the distinction between the two concepts has been exaggerated and that 'while it is not quite true to say that leadership and management are indivisible, it's misleading to see them as disconnected from each other and especially to regard either as having supremacy'. Jameson and McNay (2007) found that management is intrinsically linked with leadership in further education, as in such organisations we need managers to be leaders and vice versa. They go on to say that leadership tends to be associated with some kind of managerial responsibility, using the term 'leader-managers' which they envisage as twin strands linked together within a dual role. They explain that 'good management is essential to ensure tasks are done and the vision of leadership is implemented in reality, so the two concepts

and practices are intertwined in the concept of 'leader-manager' (Jameson and McNay, 2007, p. 71). Wallace and Gravells (2007, p. 78) agree:

After all, there are surely not many organisations that have jobs for 'managers' who cannot inspire, motivate and develop their teams, or 'leaders' who can communicate a compelling vision of the future, but cannot ensure the steps are put in place to get there.

Jupp (2015, p. 181) considers that the senior leadership team's (SLT) management and organisational skills are 'essential to delivering a vision by establishing and monitoring appropriate systems to reach operational objectives; so in this sense, leadership and management behaviours are inseparable'. In their ethnographic study of leadership in post compulsory education, Iszatt-White *et al.* (2011) presented the 'mundane features' of leadership work; suggesting that leadership can be argued to be virtually indistinguishable from other kinds of administrative and managerial work:

At various points any given individual may recognise that there may be a number of roles entailed in, for instance, 'deciding what needs to be done', 'persuading other people that it needs to be done', 'finding ways of doing it' and 'persuading people to adopt those ways'.

(Iszatt-White *et al.*, 2011, p. 19)

There is also some blurring of the distinctions as described by Lewis and Murphy (2008) who explain that management behaviours are a vehicle for leadership and it is helpful to distinguish between strategic and operational management, to talk about leaders modelling management for others and to recognise the creation of organisational culture as a management task. A study by Cox *et al.* (2010) which involved interviewing managers and senior leaders within the FE sector, found that whilst senior leaders would not necessarily require detailed technical competence in all aspects of management; leadership skills in regard to motivating staff and setting direction were seen as integral to all levels of management.

However, according to Sawbridge (2001), the idea that leadership is not the same as management enjoys widespread consensus. He notes that leadership may best be seen as a process of influence with the purpose of enabling groups and individuals to achieve goals or objectives to move an organisation forward, whereas management involves maintaining existing structures and systems.

Kotter (1990) also views leadership and management as two distinctive but complementary activities. Leadership is fundamentally about people; setting direction, aligning people, motivating and inspiring them, whereas management relates to planning, organising and controlling. This is similar to definitions given by Fullan (1991) where leadership relates to mission, direction, inspiration whilst management involves designing and carrying out plans, getting things done and working effectively with people. Keys and Wolfe (1988) agree that leadership processes are those that generally enable groups of people to work together in meaningful ways, whereas management processes are considered to be position- and organisation- specific.

Horsfall (2001, p. 2) agrees:

Management has its start point in the organisation. It is taken to involve the conduct and evolutionary development of an institution and its staff by means of rational decisions and performance monitoring underpinned by information systems, policies, procedures and plans. Leadership has a start point in the people within the organisation. It is concerned with getting their willing cooperation and contribution towards organisational goals and with meeting their needs as individuals.

Barker (1997) considers the role of leaders and managers in relation to change within an organisation; the function of leadership is to create change whereas the function of management is to create stability; in this scenario management may anticipate change and adapt to it but not create it. However middle managers need to be able to both lead and manage, because they have to lead change and develop people alongside maintaining their department through the management of systems and administration (Earley and Weindling, 2004). Sethi (1999) believes that in the past leadership was equated with a position in the hierarchy but that today it is associated with a set of behaviours that can transcend an individual's formal position within an organisation. He states that 'every member of a progressive organisation should have the opportunity to exercise leadership' (Sethi, 1999, p. 9). Hooper (2001) believes this shift from management to leadership has been brought about by the fundamental requirement for people to cope with the management of change, although there is some contradiction here between managing change and leading it which is a good reason to see the two as complementary. The challenge here is the need to establish a balance

between the leadership and management roles drawing on elements of each (Field and Holden, 2013). In a similar way to blended leadership (Collinson and Collinson, 2009) which draws on both heroic and post-heroic aspects, the leader-manager described by Jameson and McNay (2007) which brings together both roles, may be the most appropriate or the best fit.

2.3.4 Leadership development for middle managers

Twenty years ago Turner (1996) suggested that there was a need for appropriate training with an emphasis on leadership rather than on administration, for effective middle management in schools. This was echoed in research by Glover et al (1999) who found that whilst many subject leaders were believed to be leading in a positive manner, further training would be needed to enable them to develop their capacity to take people forward to achieve visionary ideals and forge a team approach. Certainly in the secondary sector these comments have been addressed and there is now a clear focus on the importance of middle leadership and an elevation of the status of the role. In 2014, James Toop, former Chief Executive of Teaching Leaders⁶, claimed there had never been a better time to be a middle leader, as head teachers devolve more autonomy and accountability to the middle (Toop, 2014). This has in part been due, possibly, to the rise of organisations and qualification structures aimed at developing middle leaders.

However unlike schools, the FE sector lacks an established and well understood career route and this does not help people to see how they could advance their career or to understand the skills and qualities required for success (ETF 2014). The development opportunities for those in middle and senior management in FE have undergone considerable change in recent decades. A study in 2002 entitled 'Tomorrow's Learning Leaders' involved a survey of nearly 2000 leaders and managers in the FE sector. The resulting report stressed the importance of leadership development for middle managers in order to address the consistent

⁶ An education charity, whose specific focus was on developing outstanding middle leaders in the schools sector and which has now merged with The Future Leaders Trust to become Ambition School Leadership.

lack of candidates applying for senior leadership positions (Frearson, 2003). This report was timely as in October 2003 the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) was launched with the aim of ensuring world-class leadership within the learning and skills sector as a key national agency within the 'Success for All' initiative. Within five years, the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) and the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) had combined to form the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). This new sector-led organisation was dedicated to the development of the further education and skills sector as it sought to accelerate the drive for excellence through priority areas which included developing the governance, leadership and management skills of the sector. The importance of building middle leader capacity was a recurrent theme in the CEL/LSIS research programme. Findings from their research projects concluded that more attention needed to be paid to the challenging role of middle leaders, and how their skills and abilities could best be developed (Collinson, 2007). This valuable work however was unable to continue as due to removal of funding, LSIS ceased to exist in August 2013.

Looking back over the organisations that have been involved in staff development for those in the FE sector, it is difficult to present a linear chronology. Many of these organisations have been formed through mergers, divisions or evolutions of previous groups, as a result of Government policy or in response to concerns raised by the sector about a sense of de-professionalising the workforce. Currently support for those in the sector is provided by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) which was established in 2013 and encompasses a professional membership organisation, the Society for Education and Training (SET). The ETF provides training opportunities for leaders and managers in the sector through the leadership hub (formerly known as Excellence in Leadership, Management and Governance). These opportunities are aimed at developing the sector's leadership capacity and capability, aiming for a coordinated approach to leadership and management development with a focus on quality improvement and putting learners first (DBIS, 2014). However a survey by the ETF in 2016 found that two-thirds of respondents had not yet used any of the resources or courses available on their Excellence in Leadership, Management and Governance website (ETF, 2016b).

For middle managers, development and training is often optional with many being expected to do this in their own time (Powell, 2001). When reviewing the literature for a recent report entitled 'Leading in Volatile Times', Greany *et al.* (2014) found that whilst FE middle leaders and managers hold critical roles for engaging staff in change, securing consistently good performance and generating creative and adaptable solutions, they are less likely to be developed and supported in this role than their more senior peers. Thompson and Wolstencroft (2015) also found that although most middle managers had expected to receive training there appeared to be a mismatch between expectations and provision with much of the training focused on specific college functions rather than the role of management. Similar findings in an earlier study by Evans (2007), demonstrated that much of the training received by middle managers focused on technical rather than leadership issues, process rather than people. There appeared to be little thought given to the holistic needs of individual managers. In a school setting, coaching and mentoring are often ranked highly as developmental activities by middle leaders, however they require investment of both time and money as well as the training of those acting as coach or mentor (Hobson and Sharp, 2005).

The current focus on distributed and devolved forms of leadership mean that high quality training and development programmes will become even more vital to prepare middle leaders for these increased responsibilities (Collinson, 2007). Hooper (2001) believes it is essential to re-educate people and develop their cognitive skills, otherwise organisations will not be able to manage the challenges of the future. A key area for development therefore is dealing with change both in working practices and relationships (Evans, 2007). Building on the concept of dual professionalism with its focus on both teaching and learning and vocational expertise, Hodgson and Spours (2015) propose the concept of 'triple professionalism' which requires a broader set of skills and knowledge and the ability to engage and collaborate at many levels. This would enable individuals to engage in networks and communities both within and external to their organisation in local and regional settings. Such skills which will be essential as the sector moves forward in a difficult climate. Leaders in successful FE colleges of the future will need greater engagement with multiple internal and external

contacts, including developing, managing and sustaining partnership arrangements (LCP, 2008).

The importance of developing middle leaders is evident in both the business and education sectors. Writing in a business context, Conger and Fulmer (2003, p. 1) stress the need to focus on the development of those in middle of the organisation 'great leadership at the top of your organization actually begins in the middle, where your high-potential managers acquire the broad range of skills they need to succeed'. Similar views have been expressed within the schools sector: 'ultimately the senior leaders and head teachers of tomorrow are the middle leaders of today' (Cladingbowl, 2013, p. 7). Within FE, Collinson (2007) observed that current middle managers are the senior leaders of tomorrow. In a report published nine years ago the Learning Consultancy Partnership (LCP, 2008) stated that within further education a systematic approach to leadership development and succession planning was critical in attracting and retaining leaders. It recommended that senior leaders need proactively to identify and develop the leaders of the future to fill the shortages and deliver the 2020 targets set out in the Leitch Review (Leitch, 2006). Whether such a shortage still exists today is unclear. However according to a recent FETL publication there is a discernible trend towards recruiting more leaders from outside the sector into leadership roles in colleges (FETL, 2016).

2.4 Summary

It is clear that the sector has changed considerably over recent decades. Simkins and Lumby (2002, p. 13) sum up the changes to FE since the early 1990s or incorporation:

There can be little doubt that much change which has occurred in further education can be explained in terms of managerialism, and that these changes in turn can be attributed to the major restructuring of the system that has occurred since 1992.

The rise of managerialism since incorporation and the high levels of accountability and audit within the sector have clearly had an impact on the leadership and management of FE colleges. However the focus has started to

shift to more collaborative and distributed forms of leadership presenting an opportunity for those in the middle to have a greater impact on the organisation. Middle managers are an immensely diverse group and as such the role is difficult to define. Whilst there is some acknowledgement of what the role entails, within FE it is subject to extreme variation leading to a general lack of understanding (Page, 2011a). The impact of new public management has seen the gradual shift of the middle managers' role from acting as role models for their colleagues, through the requirement to undertake administrative or managerial responsibilities, to a wider recognition of the need to lead a professional team of subject specialists (Busher, 2005). There is some disagreement in the literature about the distinctions between leadership and management, however Bolden (2004) believes we should seek to recruit and develop 'leader-managers' capable of adopting the role in its most holistic form.

The literature review has influenced the development of the research questions in several ways. It was clear that context is extremely important and the current state of the FE sector, austerity measures and the turbulent policy situation must all be considered as these are likely to impact on the middle manager role. The role itself is evidently diverse and has not been explored before within the specialist setting of land-based education. It is therefore important to identify what the role involves and whether the issues around lack of role clarity and role overload that are reported in the literature still persist. There are many views on the differences and similarities between leadership and management in the literature so exploring what these terms mean to the participants in the study will be relevant and lead onto discussions around whether they view the role as predominantly one of leadership or management. Exploring these areas will shed light on the views of middle managers working in the land-based sector and contribute to the current body of knowledge on this role.

The following chapter presents the research design and methodology used in the study.

CHAPTER 3 Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical and methodological approach to the study, locating it within a broader ontological and epistemological context. Issues around insider-outsider research are considered along with their implications for the study. This is followed by information on the methods of data collection, the sampling strategy used and the process of gaining access to participants. Reflections on the pilot interview and how these influenced development of the final interview schedule are explained. The process of data analysis is described and issues of validity and generalisability are considered. It concludes by considering the ethical implications of the study and how these were addressed.

The research aimed to investigate the role of the middle manager in a specialist land-based setting with particular focus on participants' views on leadership and management. Both the context, that of further education and the focus, middle managers, were selected as they are under researched in the literature. In addition selecting the specialist area of land-based education provided an opportunity for originality in the study. Informed by the literature review and my own professional context the research questions were:

- How do middle managers of land-based provision view their role in the organisation?
- What impact do the changing priorities within the sector have on their role?
- How do they define and enact leadership and management in their role?
- What are their perceptions of progression to senior leadership and management roles within the sector?

3.2 Researcher positioning

I was both an insider and an outsider in this research project. I focused on the issue of middle managers as I have 12 years' experience at this level and have

some understanding of the issues involved. According to Drake (2010) researchers often choose their research project as the result of several years of experience working with the issues. I was aware that this could lead to over-familiarity with the context and setting (Mercer, 2007) and I took care not to assume that my own perspective was widespread within the sector. It was important to remain open to new knowledge and ideas throughout the study, although I did draw on my own personal experiences as a basis for understanding what was going on. As an insider there was a shared language between myself and the participants as we understood the acronyms used in the sector and employed these during our discussions, something an outsider to the sector may struggle with. I was open about my own land-based middle management background and this again situated me as an insider, someone who worked in the sector and understood the issues. However, I was also an outsider in the respect that I had not previously visited any of the colleges who had agreed to take part in the research and therefore did not know the sites, subject areas or participants. Conducting research in colleges I was unfamiliar with ensured the research was not too narrow in its focus – a risk present with insider research. It allowed me to explore the issues in a range of similar contexts in different parts of the country enabling me to compare and contrast experiences.

3.3 Theoretical and methodological framework

This section sets out the theoretical and methodological approach taken in the study. The research philosophy underpinning this study is that of social constructionism. Social constructionism is a term applied to the theories that emphasise the socially created nature of life. Three concepts important to consider within a research philosophy are ontology, epistemology and paradigm (Denscombe, 2009). Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality whereas epistemology is the nature of knowledge or what it means to know. Constructionism comprises a relativist (socially negotiated) ontology and a subjectivist (knowledge creation) epistemology (Mehay, 2012). Social constructionists view knowledge and truth as created, not discovered by the mind (Schwandt, 2003). In this view the social world is a reality constructed through

people's perceptions and interactions with others (Denscombe, 2009). The activities involved in constructing knowledge occur against the background of shared interpretations, practices and language (Blaikie, 2007). Therefore great emphasis is placed on everyday interactions between people and how they use language to construct their reality (Andrews, 2012). This study is concerned with managers' views of leadership and management and how they see their role in within an FE college. I agree with Spillane (2005) that leadership is not simply about roles and positions but about interactions between people. This involves 'shifting perspective from viewing leadership as a single person activity to viewing it as a collective construction process' (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007, p. 40). I consider this 'collective construction' to be a social process which involves the actions and interactions that take place between people, which aligns with the social constructionist view.

Social constructionism and interpretivism both emphasise the ability of the individual to construct meaning. Therefore the research is located in the interpretive paradigm as I wanted to understand the ways in which individuals create, modify and interpret the world in which they find themselves (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2013). At its most basic level a paradigm is a set of common beliefs and values referred to by Rossman and Rallis (2003, p. 35) as a 'shared understanding of reality'. The interpretivist model has its roots in philosophy and human sciences and centres on the way humans make sense of their subjective reality and attach meaning to it (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013). This model has been influenced by the German sociologist Max Weber's *verstehen* approach. *Verstehen* refers to 'understanding' as the process by which people come to interpret and therefore understand and guide themselves in their world (Lee, 1991). Weber believed that social scientists should be concerned with interpretive understanding of humans through listening to and observing them. Interpretivists consider that the experiences of people are essentially context bound (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013) and they look for meanings and motives behind people's actions (Chowdhury, 2014) to enable them to understand the socially constructed nature of the world. In this model the researcher is part of the world they want to investigate and this means that their observations can be influenced by the expectations and predispositions they

bring to the research (Denscombe, 2009). I have been mindful of this throughout the research design and it influenced my decision to interview managers from outside my own organisation. This enabled me to gain a wider perspective and range of views from individuals in similar contexts. Critics of the method consider that the focus on words and meaning rather than numerical or quantitative data means it lacks rigour. They also observe that accounts are open to the possibility that another researcher might see things differently and produce a different account. I aimed to address this through providing detailed information and analysis of the transcripts so others can clearly see how I came to my conclusions.

I used an inductive (qualitative) approach to enable me to construct and develop theory. This process involves collecting evidence first and building knowledge and theories from this (Ritchie *et al.*, 2013), hypotheses are commonly generated from the analysis of the data rather than stated at the outset (Silverman, 2006). Thanh and Thanh (2015, p. 26) describe the 'tight connection' between the interpretive paradigm and qualitative methodology, as qualitative methods are best suited to gaining insight and in-depth information. This is because qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world and involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to that world (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). It is primarily concerned with the way human activity creates meaning and generates social order (Denscombe, 2009). Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings and attempt to make sense of them so context is key. As Blaikie (2007, p. 9) explains:

The aim is to describe the characteristics of people and social situations and then to determine the nature of the patterns of the relationships, or the networks of relationships between these characteristics.

For him there is no such thing as a pure inductive approach as all stages of the research process will have been influenced by the knowledge and experiences of the researcher (*ibid*). Whilst this is true, I agree with Cousin (2005) that subjectivity can be reduced by being aware of, reflecting on and critically analysing your own views and how they might impact on the research. In addition it is possible to take an objective stance when analysing the data. It is this

thorough analysis which informs the researcher about what is going on rather than their own preconceptions (Mack, 2010).

This research is therefore a qualitative study within an interpretivist perspective to address the research questions, focusing on in-depth accounts of managers' experiences particularly in regard to issues around leadership and management. By being sensitive to the context including the broader economic, political and cultural factors, I was able to consider how these may influence the participants' views and experiences.

3.4 Methods of data collection

Social constructionism focuses on the importance of social meaning of accounts and discourses and often leads to the use of qualitative methods as research tools, such as interviews and the analysis of transcripts (Burr, 2015). Mindful of this, the methods of data collection in this study were semi-structured interviews and an analysis of job descriptions and organisation charts, which would provide qualitative data. In addition each organisation's website was reviewed to provide background information.

Semi-structured interviews involve a guide, such as a list of topics or questions, which can be modified if required, using additional questions to follow up on participants' responses (Robson, 2011). The advantage of the semi-structured interview is that there is still an agenda to keep the interview 'on track' but there is also opportunity for free flowing discussion which can allow exploration of topics not previously determined (Hillier and Jameson, 2003). It also allows the interviewer to be reflexive and responsive to information given to them by participants (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Questions tend to be open-ended as they are flexible and allow the interviewer to probe, enabling in-depth exploration of the subject (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2013). They also encourage co-operation and facilitate the establishment of rapport and are designed to enable participants to answer fully rather than being constrained by the question.

I chose to use interviews because I agree with Ribbins (1997) view that it is only by listening to people's voices that one really finds out what it is like to be and to

work in an institution. Like Harrison *et al.* (2003) the interviews were designed to explore how managers talk about themselves and their work roles and their views on leadership and management. Conducting interviews on a one-to-one or face-to-face basis was considered to be relatively easy to set up and manage as opposed to focus groups for example, where it can be difficult to get people together and also control what is happening in the group (Denscombe, 2014). The interview schedule (see Appendix 1) was informed by the issues which emerged from the literature review. A diagram was developed which identified the main areas from both the literature and my own experiences and identified the links and overlaps between them (see p27, Chapter 2). This was useful in narrowing the research focus and developing and refining the research questions. It helped me to move from the wider issues to the specific questions I wanted to focus on and was a useful way to organise my ideas. It was also important to include questions about the participant's background and career history such as what led them to the position and number of years' experience as this was likely to influence their views. These interviews formed the principal means of gathering information and time was spent devising the questions to ensure they would provide information relevant to the research objectives. As shown in Appendix 1 my initial draft comprised 21 questions. As I had intended the interviews to last no more than one hour (anticipating that this would be the maximum time a busy middle manager would be able to spare) this would only have allowed three minutes per question, hardly time to explore the issues in any depth. I reworked the questions into three main areas, background, context and role and reduced the number to 14 (see Appendix 2). In reducing the number of questions I found it useful to consider what each question aimed to discover. The four questions on background would provide information on the structure of the organisation and where the middle manager is positioned in the hierarchy. The first question focuses on the organisation then the focus narrows to consider their department or area and finally themselves as a manager. By starting with straightforward questions about the organisation and departments I hoped the participants would relax and settle into the interview. The next section on context was key to the interpretive model used in this research which views context as vital to understanding the participant's experiences and the influences on them. The three questions focused on the Government's current policy initiatives in

regard to the FE sector and how these had impacted on their role. The responses to these would be valuable in helping me to understand their feelings about FE policy and the current situation in the sector. The final section included seven questions and covered their role in the organisation. It began by exploring what their role involved and how they viewed it. Further questions then progressed to ask them to consider how others in the organisation viewed the role. This led into an exploration of leadership and management asking them to consider each in relation to their role and encouraging them to provide vignettes on this topic. A number of prompts were also developed for each question. However it was important to be mindful that using prompts can increase the chance of bias entering the interview (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2013) and any biases or values held by the interviewer should not be revealed.

It was intended that a review of job descriptions for the middle managers would be undertaken. Whilst it was recognised that job descriptions do not always reflect what the person actually does, it was intended that they would provide information on the expectations of each organisation. It was also then possible to compare their roles as described by the middle managers with that set out in their job descriptions. I also requested organisation charts from each college, as where the middle manager role sits in the overall structure may impact on their role and inform their answers to my questions. Finally, I looked at the websites for each of the colleges to get an overview of their provision and identify each organisation's vision and values as again this may be useful in understanding the participant's responses.

3.5 Pilot interview

I did not use my own organisation in the research due to the fact that there are only two middle managers in the land-based area of which I am one, so the sample would be too narrow in focus. I did however ask my colleague if they would be prepared to take part in a pilot of the interview questions to enable me to gain feedback before approaching other colleges. Like myself they managed an area of land-based provision and can be described as being in middle management. The aim of the pilot was threefold; firstly, to see what shape the

responses to the questions might take, secondly to consider whether I need to develop the prompts and thirdly to identify how the interviewee felt about the questions and the areas covered. The interview was not recorded as I did not intend to make a transcript or include the data in my results. However, I did take notes during the interview as this is something I am unfamiliar with and wanted to practise. My reflections on the notes are in Appendix three. Following the pilot the interview schedule was adapted slightly. Additional probes were added to questions 8 and 11 and the question that had been removed about progression to senior leadership was reinstated. The final interview schedule (see Appendix 4) was used when interviewing participants from participating colleges. On reflecting upon the content of the pilot interview I felt that responses obtained would enable me to answer my research questions.

3.6 Sampling

Sampling is the process of selecting elements of a population for inclusion in a research study (O'Leary, 2013). This research employed a non-probability sample focusing on colleges in the Further Education sector who have land-based education as part of their provision either as a specialist college or as part of a general FE college. A non-probability sample involves the researcher using their judgement to achieve a particular purpose and is known as purposive sampling (Robson, 2011). The advantage of purposive sampling is that it can provide greater depth to the study (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2013) through identifying participants who are likely to provide data that are detailed and relevant to the research question (Jupp, 2006). Land-based FE departments within Higher Education Institutions were discounted because they are not subject to the changes going on in the wider FE sector in the same way. The colleges approached were selected on the basis of their spread across the country avoiding any regional bias e.g. a particular focus on the southern counties. The aim was to identify both specialist land-based colleges and those that have merged with general FE colleges, to enable comparison of responses between the two settings and similarities or differences to be observed. A list of suitable colleges was compiled using information from both the Landex and the

Association of Colleges websites. The list comprised nine specialist, and five merged, colleges. I did not approach colleges that could be seen as our competitors in the region, as managers may not feel comfortable opening up and discussing the issues around identity with someone from a competitor college.

There is little guidance in the literature concerning sample size. Sample size can be hard to estimate in the initial stages of the research and in this instance the sample size was constrained by difficulties gaining access to colleges and therefore participants to conduct interviews. In their review of the subject Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006, p. 61) found that the size of purposive samples should be established inductively and sampling continue until 'theoretical saturation' occurs. A range of factors can affect the number of interviews required to reach saturation (Marshall *et al.*, 2013). Data saturation is reached when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained and when further coding is no longer feasible (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). Achieving data saturation concerns the depth of the sample not just its size; interviews should be structured to ask multiple participants the same questions and obtain data which is both rich in quality and thick in quantity (Fusch and Ness, 2015). Saturation may be achieved more quickly if the sample is cohesive (Given, 2008) as in this case where all participants are middle managers in the land-based sector.

3.7 Gaining access

It was essential to identify and establish communication with the key gatekeeper within each organisation. This was most successful where opportunities were identified to cultivate contacts with Principals of FE colleges with land-based provision through attending sector events. At some of these networking events my line manager facilitated this through introducing me to the Principals. Seidman (2013) observed that third parties may be necessary for gaining access to potential participants but should be used as little as possible to make actual contact with them. As the land-based sector is fairly small many of the college Principals were already familiar with my organisation and its senior managers.

Following face to face introductions with the Principals, where I was able to briefly outline my research and gauge interest, emails were sent to follow up these initial discussions. The emails outlined the context, purpose and aims of the research and requested access to middle managers through provision of email addresses (see Appendix 5). In addition, job descriptions and organisation charts were requested. All of those emailed responded positively and after briefing their middle managers were happy to provide email addresses for them. There was some negotiation required with the gatekeeper over issues such as timing due to it being a particularly busy time of year. This enabled me to gain access to middle managers, the 'knowledgeable people' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2013) who would be able to provide in-depth information based on their expertise and experiences.

Where I was unable to meet the Principal in person, initial contact was made by email. From this only three replied, two declined to participate in the study as they felt managers were too busy due to the time of year with existing commitments and one replied at the end of the data collection period.

In summary, of the 14 colleges contacted exactly one-half (50%) responded positively, 35% did not respond and 15% declined to take part (Table 3.1). Of the 50% positive replies five colleges were visited and interviews conducted, one college replied at the end of the data collection period and it was decided not to proceed and one college did not have any managers who wished to take part. Interviews were carried out at three specialist and two merged colleges. The merged colleges delivered their land-based provision from dedicated sites and in both cases had been land-based colleges in their own right prior to the mergers.

College	Status	Region	Response	Number of Interviews
A	Specialist	Yorkshire and Humber	No response received	0
B	Merged	South East	No response received	0
C	Specialist	East Midlands	No response received	0
D	Specialist	London	Response received after end of data collection period	0
E	Merged	East Midlands	No response received	0
F	Merged	South West	Agreed to take part	1
G	Specialist	East of England	Agreed to take part	2
H	Merged	South East	No response received	0
I	Specialist	South East	Declined to take part	0
J	Specialist	South West	Agreed to take part	0
K	Specialist	North West	Agreed to take part	4
L	Merged	North East	Agreed to take part	3
M	Specialist	North West	Declined to take part	0
N	Specialist	South East	Agreed to take part	2
				12

Table 3.1 Participating Colleges

3.8 Participants

For the purposes of this study middle managers were characterised as those having responsibility for an academic department or curriculum area, and who are responsible for the work or management of others in that area. Once access to an organisation had been granted by the gatekeeper and email addresses for relevant middle managers obtained there was a formal approach in the form of an email containing details about the purpose of the research and asking for volunteers to take part (see Appendix 6). It was important at this stage to include reassurances about confidentiality (Jupp, 2006). I asked for volunteers to come forward from each college and aimed to interview four or five middle managers from each college giving a total of 20 interviews. This proved to be an ambitious target and a final total of 12 interviews were conducted. All participants gave their time for free and no incentives or rewards were offered. However, I did guarantee to send a summary of the key findings of the research to all participants and all

were keen to receive this to see if their views were replicated by others in similar roles. In total email addresses for 26 middle managers were obtained of which 16 (61%) agreed to participate resulting in a total of 12 (46%) interviews. The four who were not interviewed were not able to set up an interview at a mutually convenient time. Distance travelled, 241 miles in one case, meant that it was not possible to do face-to-face repeat visits. The participants were both male (5) and female (7) and ranged from three months to 20 years' experience as a middle manager in the land-based sector.

Table 3.2 shows the participants, their subject areas and length of experience in middle management.

	Name	Area	Number of years experience as middle manager	Length of time with college	Promoted from within?
1	Ruth	Higher Education	8 years	10 years	Yes
2	Ben	Animal Management	5 years	12 years	Yes
3	Jane	Equine	10 years	14 years	Yes
4	Susanne	Animal Management	12 years	19 years	Yes
5	Mike	Land and Environment	20 years	33 years	Yes
6	Jim	Foundation Learning	25 years	3.5 years	No
7	Phil	Agriculture and Agricultural Engineering	20 years	1 year	No
8	Sally	Land-based	9 years	30 years	Yes
9	Richard	Land and Environment	20 years	5 years	No
10	Laura	Equine and Animal Management	1 year	2 years	Yes
11	Lucy	Sport and Public Services	3 months	7 years	Yes
12	Kate	Agriculture and Agricultural Engineering	12 years	20 years	Yes

Table 3.2 Participants' subject areas and experience

3.9 Interview process

In each case colleges were visited and interviews held at a time and location convenient to the participants. It is important to consider the location and setting and this is why I chose to visit each of the land-based colleges in person rather than carry out the interviews over the telephone or via skype. By visiting the colleges I could immerse myself in the situation and become familiar with each participant's working environment. This is an important aspect of interpretive research and enabled me to gather information on context and setting as well as establish a rapport with the participants. This meant the interviews were able to be conducted in a more relaxed manner as the participant was in familiar surroundings. All interviews were on a face-to-face basis and in a private area to maintain confidentiality and allow the participant freedom to express their views. A face-to-face interview is a more natural encounter than for example a telephone interview, and allowed me to pick up on non-verbal cues such as actions and facial expressions, important for gathering rich qualitative data (Irvine, Drew and Sainsbury, 2013). I was able to pick up on signs of misunderstanding or hesitancy and also demonstrate my interest in their responses in an unobtrusive way. Throughout the interview I was careful to adopt and maintain a non-judgemental stance towards the thoughts and words of the participants, as advised by Holloway and Wheeler (2013), as it was important not to be led by my own experiences and perceptions and to remain open to new interpretations and ideas.

The interviews were recorded using a small data recorder and later fully transcribed. During the interviews, notes were taken of key points made under each question and these notes were typed and emailed through secure email accounts to participants to enable them to agree content and discuss any issues arising. This enabled them to check for accuracy and respond if they wanted to change or amend or add anything. Those that replied were happy that the notes were a true reflection of the content of the interview. In addition, immediately after the interviews I made a note of my initial thoughts and reflections. As the interviews progressed this proved to be a valuable resource as I was able to build

up a picture and key themes and ideas started to emerge. Although each person presented their own individual account by combining them I could begin to identify themes which would help to address my research questions. I was aware through both my reflections on the interviews and reading of the notes and transcripts that by the twelfth interview no new themes were emerging and at this point I felt data saturation had been reached.

3.10 Data analysis

The data were analysed using NVivo software and all the transcribed interviews were used in the analysis. Once the data had been imported into NVivo the process of coding began. Coding refers to labelling and systematising the data (Tracy, 2012). It is basically a tool to get at the themes in the data (Robson, 2011) and is the transitional process between data collection and analysis (Saldaña, 2009).

In analysing the data I used a general inductive approach as described by (Thomas, 2006) which allows research findings to emerge from the themes in the raw data. Before beginning the coding process I found it useful to read and re-read the transcripts, writing down my reflections and starting to identify the themes. Agar (1996, p. 153) recommends 'reading the transcripts in their entirety several times, immersing yourself in the details and trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts'. Doing this meant I was familiar with the transcripts and could identify both similarities and differences between them. This process of comparing data with data to find similarities and differences is known as the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014). This basically involves going through the data again and again comparing each element with all of the other elements (Thomas, 2013).

I then began the coding using words or short phrases that arose from the transcripts to bring together data from each of the interviews. Throughout the coding process new categories emerged and some of the data would be allocated more than one code. Other codes were further separated out to break down larger themes. I started to identify links and relationships between the codes and

once the coding process was complete I was able to identify a number of themes. Themes are described by Creswell (2012) as broad units of information that contain several codes aggregated together to form a common idea. Once the data have been organised by themes (which may include themes about what is absent in the data), the researcher can see whether they throw light on the questions/issues being addressed (Cousin, 2005). In this case the codes and themes arose naturally from the data using an emic perspective to obtain the insider's view (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013) by examining the experiences and perceptions of the participants rather than imposing a framework of my own. Qualitative research focuses on this emic perspective, which represents the setting from the participants' viewpoint (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014) and is fundamental to understand how people perceive the world around them (Fetterman, 2008). This approach is appropriate as it enables the researcher to gain access to the participants' social reality, their experiences and interpretations and the social construction of their world.

The researcher's view is considered to be the etic perspective, that of an outsider. Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) explain an etic focus as representing a setting with the researcher's terms and viewpoints. It is important to be aware of how your own perspectives and preconceived ideas may affect data collection and analysis, for example, trying to look for evidence that supports your own beliefs about the situation (Thomas, 2013). It is essential to see what the data are telling you rather than asking the data to yield responses required by the issues that guided the collection (Cousin, 2005) otherwise you are likely to miss themes in the data. Once identified the themes were summarised and shared with the participants for their comment. This took place six months after the interviews. Only three of the participants responded, commenting that the results were interesting and reflected their role. This collaboration aimed to reduce subjectivity on the part of the researcher, a criticism of the inductive approach. Using this approach enabled me to move from rich in-depth data to theory and description giving accounts of reality as seen by others and generating new theoretical ideas (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013).

3.11 Rigour in qualitative research

There is no single way to measure the quality of qualitative research because it is so diverse (Guba and Lincoln 2005). Concepts of reliability and validity as they are normally understood are considered by some to be inappropriate for judging the quality of social constructionist research collecting qualitative data (Burr, 2015). In discussing in qualitative research many researchers have reconceptualised concepts of validity and reliability, adopting what they consider to be more appropriate terms, such as quality, rigour and trustworthiness (Golafshani, 2003).

Whiteley (2012) believes that a conscious and transparent effort should be made by the researcher to achieve rigour. Research should be conducted in a systematic way and detailed audit trails of evidence provided (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2013) including transparent and clear descriptions of the research process (Noble and Smith, 2015). In qualitative research transparency is a recognised marker of quality (Spencer *et al.*, 2003) and every stage of the study should be open to scrutiny (Whiteley, 2012). This means that sufficient detail should be included about how the data were collected (Meyrick, 2006). Throughout this research I have aimed to be transparent both in my approach and in my analysis of the data. This has included using descriptions of participants' accounts to support my emerging findings.

Trustworthiness can be defined as the degree of confidence in the data, interpretation and methods used (Given, 2008). Trustworthiness can be strengthened through including opportunities for participants involved in the study to comment on the findings and emerging themes (Thomas, 2006). In this study participants were given the opportunity to comment on both the notes from their own interview and on the themes identified once data analysis of all interviews was complete.

Qualitative studies are not generalizable in the traditional sense of the word, they cannot be extended from the sample to the whole population. Instead 'they aim to produce research which can inform and enhance the readers' understanding' (Myers, 2000, p. 4) through producing rich description of the phenomenon being studied. I am aware that in this study cannot represent the whole population,

however as land-based is a relatively small sector it is hoped that the study will provide an insight into the issues for middle managers across this specialist provision.

3.12 Ethical issues

The majority of colleges with land-based provision are members of Landex. Links were already established with this organisation as the college, for which I work, is a member and I have attended the Landex Quality and Curriculum group. The number of land-based colleges is relatively small and as members of Landex they form a fairly close knit group, with representatives from each college joining together at various committees and forums throughout the year. This means that care needed to be taken to ensure that Colleges and participants were not identifiable if the results of the study are published. For example, I cannot give more detail on location than region of England and even this may still enable colleges to be identified as for example there is only one land-based college in the East of England. It was also important that the participants were aware of my identity and background, so that they were able to make an informed choice about whether to participate in the research.

All the participants were adults and held middle management positions within a Further Education setting. Having been provided with written information about the purposes of the research (see Appendix 6) they were able to give informed consent through signing a declaration (see Appendix 7). I ensured the participants were aware of the areas that were going to be covered by providing them with a list of interview questions in advance to help them decide whether or not to participate. The questions focused on the role of the middle manager, including challenges of the role and, if someone were experiencing a number of challenges, discussing these could possibly have caused them some anxiety. It was acknowledged that there is always the possibility that exploring issues within an interview setting could cause discomfort to the participant particularly when exploring issues around role and identity. The data gathered were not expected to be of a highly sensitive or confidential nature. The participants were not potentially vulnerable and there were no safeguarding or child protection issues.

I provided anonymity for the participants by changing their names and that of the institution they worked for and I assured them of confidentiality. Participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the research at any time up until the end of the data collection period, however none chose to do so. I was mindful of the BERA (2011) guidelines which state that it is important the researcher recognises that participants may experience distress or discomfort during the research process and steps must be taken to minimise this and put participants at ease. The researcher has a duty to ensure the rights and well-being of those involved in the study are protected at all times (O'Leary, 2013). Personal data held included participants' names, job titles and work email addresses. However once the interviews had taken place all data were anonymised. Colleges and participants were given pseudonyms which enabled me to distinguish them but does not reveal their actual identity. The data were stored on a password protected personal desk top computer and backed up on an encrypted flash drive. Once transcribed interview recordings were deleted.

In summary this chapter has presented the theoretical and methodological approach to the study. Connections have been made between the research philosophy, that of social constructionism, the approach taken and the methods used in data collection. By explaining the development of the interview schedule, the interview process and the method of data analysis I hope to provide transparency in the research process. The process was not without its challenges; chiefly these were the difficulty in recruiting participants and the time and distance involved in actually carrying out the interviews. However the resulting 12 interviews provided a large body of data on which to draw. The study presents the views of the middle managers at a certain point in time and as such provides a snapshot of their views during that period. The following chapter presents the findings of the research, supported throughout by direct quotes from the participants in the study.

Chapter 4 Presentation of the Main Findings

The following chapter presents the main findings from the interviews undertaken with 12 middle managers from five different colleges providing land-based education in England. It begins by exploring what led the managers to their current roles within their organisations. It then provides an account of the roles undertaken by the middle managers, the impact of recent policy initiatives and strategies and their response to these. Differences between the managers experiences are highlighted in particular those between new and experienced middle managers. In asking the managers to reflect on how their role is viewed by others in the organisation issues around 'middleness' are described. This leads on to an exploration of the middle managers' views on leadership and management and how they enact these as part of their role. It concludes with the participants' views on career progression and moving to senior leadership roles.

4.1 Participants

The 12 participants had varying degrees of experience as middle managers ranging from three months to 25 years and covered a number of subject areas commonly found in land-based colleges. These included agriculture and agricultural engineering, animal management, horse management (equine), and land-based departments. Land-based departments were broad and generally included a mix of subjects including horticulture, floristry, countryside management, fisheries management, arboriculture and game keeping. All participants described college management structures which would fit into a traditional hierarchical model with a principal at the top and layers of management underneath placing themselves clearly in the middle of the organisation. In most of the colleges there were staff identified under the middle managers who acted either as a deputy or who had responsibility for the academic progress of a group or course of students. This role often focused on quality and academic issues and student progress but did not involve line management of staff. This could be designated as a lower middle management layer with the heads of department

forming a higher middle management tier.

There was considerable variation in the size and complexity of the college management structures described by the participants. There was also a plethora of different titles used, from Head of Area and Assistant Director through to Curriculum Manager. Despite differences in titles, there was much commonality and overlap in the roles they undertook as middle managers. It is interesting to note that whilst 'Head of' or 'Manager' were commonly used, none of the participants had the term leader in their job title.

4.1.1 Preparation for the role

In discussing what led them to the position of middle manager, the majority of participants spoke about their strong vocational backgrounds in the subject areas they were now managing. This subject knowledge enabled them to understand and design an effective curriculum and gave them credibility in the eyes of their teams. All of the participants had been involved in teaching or lecturing earlier in their career and for many there had been a progression from full time lecturer through a series of positions with increased responsibility such as managing a course or type of provision, before progressing to a middle manager role. Two of the participants had previously worked at a more senior level in another college prior to taking up their current middle management post.

The training and development undertaken by the middle managers was extremely varied. The majority had participated in some form of leadership and management training through attending courses or programmes funded by their employers. In all cases this training had occurred after they had been appointed to the role rather than in preparation for it. Once in post, this was supplemented by short updates which mostly focused on management issues such as how to use a particular piece of software, carry out an appraisal or implement a new policy. Some of the participants had undertaken Masters level qualifications which they stated had helped them in gaining promotion or been of use to them in their role particularly where their departments included higher education courses.

4.1.2 Restructuring

In many cases the participants had been with their current organisation for a long time with half being employed for over ten years and the longest having served for 33 years. In all but three cases, they had been promoted from within the organisation, often as a result of a restructure.

Two years after I had been here there was a restructure and that's when I applied to move into middle management.

(Ruth)

There was a restructure and we were given team leadership in 2004 and there was another big restructure in 2007.

(Suzanne)

As many of those interviewed had obtained their position following a restructure their view of the process was fairly positive. However, for participants who had come to the role following a restructure in a previous college where they lost their position, the view of restructuring was understandably more negative. Jim's experience illustrates this point:

What you get with regime change and it's a new phenomenon in FE, new Principal wants to reorganise, reshape and change the management structure so in 2012 the whole of the management team well it was middle managers and up were put into a pool and surprise surprise nobody came out of it at the end and it's a harsh thing.

There was evidence that all the colleges had undergone one, or more commonly multiple restructures and that this restructuring was accepted as normal practice in the sector. As one participant who had worked in further education for 30 years joked:

If you work in FE long enough you will completely know the annual restructure some organisations need to go through.

(Sally)

Often these restructures were prompted by external factors such as Government policy changes or initiatives or a need to respond to changes in funding. This restructuring was still in evidence in response to current Government priorities around English and maths and apprenticeships. Several participants spoke of

new roles being created to lead apprenticeships or English and maths. These positions were often at middle management level to take the lead in implementing and driving forward these key areas.

Apprenticeships, we have just actually got a new apprenticeship manager, which is quite useful because my area being so big it's quite hard to have an apprentice and an FE and an HE hat on all at the same time.

(Laura)

So it's a case of restructuring, apprenticeships have increased, there's now a director of apprenticeships and that has gone into a separate area and they are in charge of the assessors, they may work here, but they report to an apprentice team.

(Sally)

The apprenticeships programme is a separate department, it used to be a few years back that we ran all the apprenticeships for horticulture and landscape but then it was decided to take all the apprenticeship programmes for the whole college and put it under one department which is fine, I can see the logic in that.

(Mike)

4.1.3 Role expansion

One consequence of restructuring appeared to be the creation of leaner senior management teams and some devolving of responsibilities from senior into middle management. For those who had been in middle management for a number of years their roles had changed considerably over time expanding to take on more responsibility and with this becoming more challenging. One participant spoke about how they felt they had risen in seniority within the college due to restructures and changes in job role but were still classed as middle management. This is also evident in the experiences described by two of the interviewees, one of whom again refers to restructuring:

I think because we have been through so many restructures here that the management role I took on eight years ago is incomparable with the demands I have now. We have sort of upgraded just by the restructuring of the college.

(Ruth)

I think the job has expanded, I think the demands of the job have, the demands both from staff and senior management and I think from ourselves if I am honest with you. The demands and expectations are far bigger now than they were six years ago.

(Susanne)

Those who had been in post longer could clearly articulate how the role had changed and evolved over time. One reason given for remaining in post for an extended period was this constant development of the role. Mike who has been a middle manager for 20 years reflected 'I don't think two or three years have passed without some major change'. He went on to describe how he had inherited or absorbed other subjects and had spent time learning about new vocational areas. This role expansion coupled with growing levels of experience and authority appeared to positively influence the retention of the managers in this study.

4.2 The middle manager role

This section explores the role as described by the managers interviewed. It covers the administrative aspects, teaching, their involvement in strategy and issues around resource and staff management.

Whilst the roles undertaken by the middle managers were wide and varied in their remit, there was a great deal of similarity in the tasks involved. These included things such as timetabling, curriculum planning, overseeing quality processes, preparing reports, managing budgets and managing a team of staff. The participants spoke about the variety of work they undertook and how this was affected by the time of year but that it could also change on a daily basis. The three quotes below demonstrate the changing and unpredictable nature of the role.

It is broad, every day is different, usually it's probably 50:50 staff management everything from establishing and sorting out timetable issues, member of staff is off sick so sorting out cover, looking at the resources, developing the resources...

(Mike)

I think it's a very fluid field if I am honest with you, it goes back again to what's on the agenda, what time of year it is, as to what gets priority and how much time you spend on something. It's quite fluid and it's just going with what's happening now and meeting the needs of the college, students, the team etc.

(Susanne)

The job is so diverse and its really busy and at times it's just frenetic and jumbled that often its say, not quite crisis management – that's too extreme – but its having a list of jobs and I'm doing the one that's most important at the top and if there's a situation with a student that needs to be sorted then that takes priority.

(Ruth)

This fluid, fragmented and jumbled environment was recognised by all the middle managers. There was a requirement to adjust rapidly to constantly shifting priorities and some used terms such as 'running on the spot', 'firefighting' and 'spinning plates' to describe aspects of their role. Time management and workload was mentioned several times throughout the interviews. The quote below from Richard illustrates this.

You know, there's just a constant barrage and you get something just done and then in comes something else or you remember about something else you should have done. So three people could happily, find themselves easily employed in this role – quite easily.

4.2.1 Time management

There appeared to be a correlation between the amount of experience in the role and issues around time management and workload with less experienced managers more concerned with this aspect of the role. This is illustrated by quotes from the two newest managers, Laura and Lucy, who had found that managing the workload within the time was challenging. Their experiences were similar although they worked in different colleges.

Unfortunately, you know, I came in thinking, 'yes I am going to do this', and 'I am going to do that' and unfortunately time just, you know, trying to get a work life balance just doesn't exist.

(Laura)

I think, for myself, being a new middle manager, I think it's just learning to prioritise what in that moment in time is important and if I need to shut myself away for that hour, to get something done because it's very pivotal at that point it needs to be done. So it's just working out for myself the time management aspect and that will come with experience, I'm sure, as to how I do that more successfully.

(Lucy)

The ability to 'go with what's happening now' as described by Susanne appeared to be challenging for the less experienced managers who were learning how to balance the demands of the role. Those in post longer had become more adept at multi-tasking and identifying the activities that needed to take priority. Those new to the role felt they were overwhelmed trying to do everything and comply with every request. Whilst adaptability and responsiveness appeared to be key attributes of the successful middle manager, knowing what to prioritise in any given moment came with experience in the role.

For many of the managers, working outside normal hours (early mornings or after 5pm) was the main opportunity to get uninterrupted time. This was mentioned by both new and experienced managers, who reported that they would arrive early or work late at certain times of the year to ensure they had time to focus on tasks such as report writing or timetabling. Many of the managers described how being accessible to the staff and responding to issues as they arose meant that they found it difficult to get extended periods of time to focus on one task.

Today I have been timetabling which takes up quite a lot of my time, probably instead of doing what I would like to do which is lock the door and go away for six hours and timetable, I probably do an hour of timetabling and then, because my office is here, I don't know, perhaps I should have an office somewhere else, but I think it's important that I am close to people that they have a point of reference to speak to.

(Ben)

This need to do focussed tasks and work with staff had the potential to be a source of conflict as, on one side, they wanted to be supportive and responsive to their teams but, on the other, they knew they also had to file that report or

complete those timetabling changes. It could be difficult to balance these two competing demands.

4.2.2 Teaching

Unlike many middle management positions in the compulsory sector, teaching formed a small part of the role for the managers interviewed. There was a range of responses from 'no teaching required' to 'around five hours per week'. In some cases, they were delivering a particular subject specialism or a module they had developed themselves where they enjoyed the contact with the students.

There is a particular speciality which we haven't been able to recruit to, so I just do a couple of hours per week, which I enjoy. I think it's good to have the contact with the students.

(Ruth)

I mean the teaching is an easy one because you have your allocated hours, your five hours a week. They are subjects I've developed, new modules, so I'm fine with the planning for that.

(Susanne)

However, for others, being released from teaching was a relief as they had found it too demanding alongside their other responsibilities.

Thankfully I don't have to teach anymore because it was just a bit too much.

(Laura)

All of the managers were required to organise cover for absent staff and that often meant delivering the cover sessions themselves if there was no-one else free. Doing cover was accepted as necessary but it took them away from the main focus of the role and made things more challenging from a time management perspective.

I'm a port of call in terms of cover.

(Jim)

I don't teach, I don't have any teaching commitments in terms of hours within my week, however, obviously, if there is cover, as there is today, then I will obviously be available.

(Lucy)

I do cover at FE which this year has been quite a lot, [it's been] difficult with all the other roles and responsibilities I have and has caused issues this year.

(Jane)

In some instances, a cover rota was in operation, however, this was not always successful, particularly in situations where a department was in the process of recruiting new staff to join the team. The impact of this cover requirement, on the managers interviewed varied according to the current staffing situation in their areas.

4.3 Policy influence and response

4.3.1 Awareness of policy initiatives

Awareness of recent policy initiatives was high among all the managers, as Richard stated we are 'very aware, because they impact upon us so much'. Other managers agreed:

Has the Government agenda affected what I do? Absolutely, whether it be curriculum changes, qualification changes or funding changes.

(Phil)

All participants spoke about the increased focus on English and maths in the curriculum and the need to develop apprenticeship programmes. They were able to articulate how these policies had impacted on their curriculum and the changes that had been made and continued to be made.

The maths and English has obviously impacted a great deal as well, just in the fact that it's something else to worry about them getting through.

(Richard)

English and maths is already embedded into the timetable, it's the first thing we do for a timetable and then everything fits around that so it's, it does influence.

(Laura)

Whilst policy for areas such as English and maths was generally decided and led by the senior executive team to be implemented cross college, the managers still felt they had quite a lot of autonomy over the development of their own areas. They were all able to get involved with and set the direction for their team. Many mentioned drawing up business plans for their areas whilst others were regularly involved in strategic planning meetings. They understood and accepted the need for cross college approaches but also valued the autonomy they had over their vocational areas. Susanne's view was common among the managers:

I mean as with everything we have to toe the line if there is a cross college perspective, which is fine, but I think, pretty much, it's a nice thing to be able to say that as leaders of the curriculum areas we are pretty much devolved with doing things how we want providing as I say it's in line. It's not something out left field and crazy. We are asked for our initiatives and ideas and that sort of thing. There are meetings and focus groups to discuss that, to also help colleagues how to approach and plan things, so I would say, in the main, 'yes', we do have a lot of autonomy in that respect.

(Susanne)

4.3.2 Strategic input

Some managers also felt that they were able to have strategic input into senior management decisions.

We do have strategic input as heads of area and we do have a lot of autonomy in terms of the direction of our areas.

(Jane)

The managers were able to influence development of the resources, recommend the introduction of new courses or addition of new subject areas and devise the curriculum to meet the needs of their learners. Ruth referred to this as the 'localised strategy' for her area. The importance of providing an outstanding student experience and sending them away as well-rounded employable

individuals was evident and whilst managers were clearly aware of the influences of external policy levers they put high priority on the student getting 'a good deal'. They spoke at length about enrichment programmes, study tours, work experience opportunities and the standard of resources they were able to provide for the learners in their areas.

However, for those that had been in post for a number of years the amount of freedom they had to manage their curriculum had decreased as seen in this extended quote from Mike who reflects on how his role has changed and developed:

I used to have a lot more [autonomy] than I have now, basically, previous principals were just, 'go away and do it, just be successful and make it work'. Now, I'm not saying they were brilliant days, they were different. Now, it's a lot more expectation, legislation and change. If I said I'm not going to teach in the third term, I'm going to have all the students out on work experience, the trouble with that is the students do their GCSEs in the third term, and now with the new synoptic assessments on the level 2 and 3 they need to be here to sit that, so I can't be free spirited and just do what I want, but I have enough autonomy that I don't feel chained. I do have to fill paperwork in though now, a lot more than I used to!

Mike and Phil who have been delivering in the sector for a long period of time (both over 20 years) spoke about the increase in paperwork and administrative aspects of the role. Although they valued the autonomy they still had, they were aware of an increase in auditing and of gathering evidence for this purpose. Whilst they understood the need for this they felt that in some cases it had gone too far. The phrase 'the tail wagging the dog' was used when describing aspects of their role which was led by policy rather than by the student experience.

4.3.3 Being ahead of the game

One element that came through strongly in regard to strategy was the need to be able to try and identify what the next policy change or initiative would be. More experienced managers spoke about the constant need to spot what is coming on the horizon and prepare for it, working with senior teams to ensure they were

ready to meet new challenges. This focus on being one step ahead of the game was seen as key to ensuring the success of not just their area but the whole organisation. More experienced managers appeared to have become adept at this forward planning and saw it as a key part of the role.

I am already working on next year, you have got to be thinking all the time about change, whatever it is: Government policy, funding, whatever changes, and be proactive.

(Kate)

I'd like to think my role is looking forward, to making sure the timetables are right, the curriculum plans are right, we've got all the documentation well in advance that I don't need to fire fight. So I see my role as constantly looking forward being involved with awarding bodies, ensuring that my staff are up to date with what's happening, not tomorrow but next year.

(Ben)

This concept of 'thinking all the time about change' typifies not only the middle manager's role but the FE sector as a whole. Jim talked about how policy was continually evolving and that it was important to keep up to date with the rhetoric surrounding it to enable you to second guess the next change or initiative likely to be implemented.

I think it is evolution, and you can see the next initiative coming. Currently it's around employability skills, wider skills, work experience having real meaning and a sense of purpose.

(Jim)

He went on to describe how his area would be ready for this and what they already had in place to ensure they were ahead of the game. Managers also spoke about how adept their organisations were at communicating and planning for changes. This often involved discussions at regular meetings with members of the senior management team as Susanne and Jane explained:

Anything that is particularly current, no that's wrong, it's a bit more proactive than that, that is on the horizon, even white papers and things like that will get discussed.

(Susanne)

We are also very good as a college at communicating everything that is going on and it is communicated effectively throughout the college, we are one step ahead of the game in terms of what is going on.

(Jane)

This attitude was common among the participants who understood that this was the nature of the sector that they worked in. Being able to respond and adapt quickly to a changing agenda was seen as an essential part of their role. This did not mean however, that they were all happy with this state, as Phil, who has worked in the sector for 20 years explained:

Whether we like it or not, the next three years will be different to the last two years. The next Government will have a different agenda. The higher up you go it seems to be all about what the minister says and now we've got a minister that's in the Department for Education rather than BIS [Business, Innovation and Skills]. It's pointless worrying about it.

He believes that people within the FE sector have become accustomed to constant change:

That's not to say I am happy about it but, in terms of my daily work, you can't... you have to conform otherwise you don't get... it all gets harder.

He went on to describe how it was important to 'carry on doing what we can and control what we can control', focusing on the areas where you could make an impact.

4.3.4 Finance and funding

Closely linked to strategy were issues around finance and funding. The sector has seen large funding cuts to areas of provision and this impacted upon the middle managers' role as summed up by Jim:

Year on year, funding always becomes a challenge as the mantra is 'more for less' so the funding is going down and yet you have to deliver more and I think any college, land-based or not, has to look at the economics of what they are doing and why they are doing it.

For many finance formed a large part of the role including managing budgets, generating commercial revenue and ensuring recruitment and therefore income

targets were met. They had to keep up to date with the current funding methodology and how this would impact on their curriculum, as Susanne explains:

You have to know the funding rules and how often they change and what they are now and that then fires onto recruitment and the bigger picture. Yes, we are animal studies and we bring in finances for the college but, yes, it does impact not just on our work but then on the teams as well. You know if funding's cut, or something like that, well there will be a shortfall.

Participants felt that it was also important that all staff in their area understood the impact of funding on their curriculum rather than it being solely the manager's responsibility. Jim had spent time training his team to enable them to see the bigger picture as he explained:

Finance is another example, the budget, how its derived, I have had to spend a lot of time with my team explaining the fundamentals of funding because they just didn't know and didn't really think that they had to know. Well, we just get the students and teach them and do our bit, but you've got to understand now.

To boost the finances of the areas, time was spent identifying commercial opportunities which would generate income and this meant networking with a wide range of potential partners outside the organisation. It also involved being aware of new initiatives and alternative sources of income that they could draw on which would complement the work already happening within their areas. Ben spoke about 'making links and identifying opportunities that might grow into something'. Some managers were less comfortable with this aspect of their role preferring to focus on the academic side of things. Sally reflecting on senior management's view observed that:

I think they would like me to be more outward going so, you know, working with businesses more, getting out there and getting them involved with further initiatives.

There was evidently a pressure to ensure that departments or areas were not spending too much money and were able to contribute to the organisation overall. Comments by Kate and Laura illustrate these points:

At the moment we are just writing business plans that we have to present. We are very much responsible for our area for making a contribution.

(Kate)

There is a pressure there to ensure that we are not spending too much money.

(Laura)

Despite the current funding situation, the emphasis was on doing the most with what resources they had. Managers spoke about 'focusing on what you can do not what you can't do' and that 'it's about making it happen'. Ben describes how you need to be flexible and creative in finding solutions:

In terms of certain variables you are working with i.e. your budget, it's about how do we meet that creatively it's not a case of 'oh we can't have it' but 'how do we do that slightly differently to achieve the same goal'.

This demonstrates the positivity of the managers who put the learners at the centre of what they were doing and were creative about how they used their resources to provide the best experience possible.

4.4 Management of staff and resources

4.4.1 Resource management

In addition to the pressures of managing their departments, many of the participants were also responsible for large, physical, resources such as equestrian centres, animal collections, green houses and gardens or farms. This enabled the managers to keep a strong practical connection with their vocational areas of interest and expertise but added extra pressure as the resources were often large and diverse in nature. Whilst there would usually be an animal centre or farm manager (or similar) in place to look after the day to day running of these facilities they were often line managed by the middle managers who had to ensure the resources met the needs of the students and the curriculum. In many cases there was the requirement to generate a commercial income. Land-based industries such as agriculture are considered high risk so there is also the

element of ensuring resources are up to standard and that safe working practices are being adhered to. Compared with other vocational areas in the FE sector this resource element adds an additional dimension to the middle manager's role.

The management of these resources also contributed to a wide variety of queries and issues that came up on a daily basis. It could also mean that, geographically, the manager was responsible for large areas of the college which could be spread across more than one site. Offices, teaching areas and the practical resource (animal collection or similar) may be in different locations across the campus and the managers felt it was important to get out and walk around the areas and resources as often as possible. The following quotes illustrate these points:

I am the sort of person that wanders round. Today, I have already been round engineering and I very much want to meet the students, and know what's going on, on the ground, I find that's the easiest way to manage.

(Kate)

If I've not gone round the campus and wandered into a classroom, or wandered into the workshops, at least two or three times a week, I feel like I've not been out there, so being out there and being seen helps, and talking to the teams, finding out what the issues are.

(Mike)

When the students come back in September I'll be around every single day. I'll do twenty minutes at least wandering around trying to get to every single area.

(Phil)

I do like to get around and see what's happening, you know get up to the workshops, get to the farm, over to the glass houses and green houses and see what's happening there.

(Richard)

Kate, Mike and Phil use the term 'wandering' to describe what they are doing which presents it as a very casual activity which is non-threatening for the staff. In fact, these excursions around the site are vital, enabling the managers to gather valuable information about what is happening in their area. Managers with less experience could also see the benefits of this but found it more difficult to get away from the office, as Laura explains:

I'd love to I would love to be able to get round to go in and show my face and be able to go every morning and every afternoon go and see my staff and just have a bit of a roundup of the day or round up of the week.

This can be linked to earlier comments made about workload and time management.

4.4.2 Supporting staff

All the middle managers had line management responsibility for staff members within their area. This included all stages of the process from shortlisting and interviewing, through to reviews and appraisals and performance monitoring. The number of staff managed varied from relatively small numbers of five or six up to 28 individuals. All the managers had an office base in close proximity to their team and the teaching staff. This was seen as a benefit because they were easily accessible to staff who could drop in and ask questions or check things with them. All participants had an open door policy and were happy to meet and discuss issues with staff as they arose. Nearly all spoke about how they were the 'go to person' for anything connected with their area.

Comments made by the interviewees reflect a commitment to staff and to their professional development that is separated from purely managerial concerns. For many of the participants, about half of their time was spent on organising and managing staff and dealing with staff issues. For some this began first thing in the morning by checking that all staff were ready for the day and that there were no immediate issues to solve.

I'll usually go round in the morning and make sure everyone is ok and set for the day.

(Laura)

I will normally see all of the staff in their offices just to check they are all ok, not a patronising is everything ok, just a 'Good morning how is everything? Are there any issues? What's going on?' before they start their day.

(Jane)

As managers, they were very keen to support their team and help them develop. This included having regular one-to-one meetings with staff, giving them ownership over small projects, helping them to reflect on their roles and the purpose of what they are doing and identifying areas for development.

I hope they see it [the role] as guidance and advice and, you know, really supporting them which I try to, both professionally and personally. I try to make sure that they develop and that they are on target.

(Richard)

The importance of getting the right staff in the right roles was seen as key to the success of the department, and to enable them to do a good job. A large part of the role was ensuring lecturing staff have the conditions they need to be able to do a good job and give the students a great experience.

I guess a lot of it is about trying to put the staff in the best possible position. The most simplistic way of doing that is providing them with a subject package that they find most motivating as opposed to, 'we need someone to teach that so go and teach it'.

(Ben)

In some cases, it also involved encouraging staff to undertake research in their subject area which could lead to higher level qualifications and raise the profile of the institution therefore increasing student recruitment. One manager observed that this also had a positive impact on staff motivation and sense of self-worth.

Whilst they did undertake a lot of what could be described as problem solving activities, some managers stressed the importance of helping staff to find their own solutions, for example through using a coaching model. These managers generally had been in post longer and were more experienced. Some had undertaken the LSIS coaching training programme which had been promoted in the early 2000s and there was evidence of a legacy from this. Mike and Kate had both been in the sector for more than 20 years and were able use this approach

in their work with staff.

I've been on a number of coaching training programmes, and one of the things I have learnt is you don't solve the staff problems, you support the staff to solve their own problems which can be a bit annoying for them sometimes. I can see what the issues are, they come with a view that I'll sort out that, but it's important that they can work it out for themselves, 'what is it you really need?' and then we'll see how we can get it.

(Mike)

I think staff see the role as someone to go to, I would certainly hope the staff feel that they could come to me with any concerns and that I would actually help solve them. I try and encourage people to come with solutions rather than just dump things on me otherwise you end up with a massive amount of emails and challenges.

(Kate)

This approach aimed to make the staff more self-sufficient and less reliant on the manager as the manager did not want to be seen as the problem solver of the department and they understood the burden this could place on themselves. However, it was only the more experienced managers who discussed this approach.

4.4.3 Middleness

The role of providing a link between the staff and the senior management and aspects of 'middleness' were evident during the interviews, both from the point of feeding information down from above and being a voice for their teams. Kate and Jane spoke about this aspect of their role and ensuring that their teams concerns or issues get heard at senior management level.

I certainly would be their voice, and I put it to them that I am working more for them than they are for me, you know, in a lot of respects, and sorting out what needs to be sorted out so we can all do our jobs properly.

(Kate)

I think my staff see my role as being responsible for what happens on a day-to-day basis, for being their voice if a particular issue or concern needs to be communicated higher to support them, but also to ensure that they are doing the right thing.

(Jane)

As well as acting as the voice and feeding information up the chain they also had to communicate policies and directives from the senior team back to their staff. Although, on the whole, middle managers were positive about their roles there were still challenges, one of these was the well-recognised aspect of 'middleness' and acting as a buffer between senior management and lecturing staff. Ruth spoke about 'acting as a buffer' between the senior team and teaching staff, filtering and passing on information. For Ben the issues are those typically found in the middle of an organisation:

The challenge has been purely sitting in the middle with people wanting more and more things from you on both sides, but often opposing positions. In trying to draw people to understand, probably, my seniors' [sic] position, and how they are going to cope with that and convince them to cope with that, continues to be a journey that carries on still.

Acting as a buffer or trying to help people to understand different positions are common for middle managers. The extended quote from Jane explores this aspect of the role but ends on a rather upbeat note:

I've no doubt that the Principal's job is a nightmare. I've no doubt that the Vice Principal's job is a nightmare but in terms of... you are the sandwich aren't you, the meat in the sandwich because in terms of pressure you've got the pressure from above and the pressure from below and you're the one that has to deal with all of it with relatively little room for manoeuvre in terms of where can I go for help because at the top the information is cascaded down, somebody else deals with that and they then devolve that and they delegate that responsibility. But when it comes to our level there is very little room for delegation because the teaching staff cannot do any more than they are doing but senior management are telling you that you need to do it, so it is a difficult role in that respect, but we love it that's why we do it!

This lack of ability to delegate was recognised by several of the managers who felt that the lecturing staff were already working hard. Mike reflected on this and considered the pressures on staff:

I have two assistants, I used to have four, the staff are expected to teach more and to a higher standard, they had always been expected to teach to a high standard but, you know, in the past, if you were good, that was good enough, now you need to strive for outstanding all the time.

This reduction in the number of assistants was also mentioned by Ben who was frustrated with the inability to delegate tasks. The managers were clearly aware of their team's workload and in many cases were reluctant to add to this because, as Ruth observed, 'their primary focus is front line teaching'. This lack of opportunity to delegate, at times, meant that managers sometimes undertook tasks they did not see as part of their role, just to get things done. As Richard describes:

Sometimes you do find yourself doing something and you think, really am I doing this? Should I not be doing something else?

Managers spoke positively about their teams and recognised that for the department to function effectively their teams had to function. They were genuinely interested in helping their teams develop and worked with individuals to facilitate this. This aspect of their role was clearly significant as it took up approximately half their time. Funding cutbacks and restructures had in some cases led to a reduction in lower middle management posts (course managers, team leaders) and this had impacted on the middle manager's role.

4.5 How the role is viewed by senior management

For many of the participants it was clear that their role in the college was acknowledged as being crucial to the overall success of the organisation. Several of the managers spoke about how valuable the role of middle manager was to their colleges.

I think the college, in general, sees this middle management role as a real key to success for the whole college.

(Kate)

My direct line manager, I know, he sees us as vital, crucial, real lynch pins in the college, leaders of our areas, you know, it all happens because of us and our strong management.

(Susanne)

We had an all staff meeting last week and we were highlighted as 'these are the pivotal people' in making the college a success.

(Lucy)

There were no negative views expressed about how senior management saw the role of the middle manager. Ben observed that senior managers 'do have some sympathy with the difficulties managers faced', however, Ruth felt that 'they don't always understand the complexity or enormity of the role'. Most felt that senior management teams saw the role as one of maintaining high performance and taking the college in the right direction strategically as evident in the following quotes:

Vice Principals and Principal would see us as not necessarily hands on, more that paperwork side of things, more performance monitoring, business managing, driving the department forward, always coming up with new ideas.

(Lisa)

Providing leadership and taking the college where they want it to go, steering in the right direction.

(Susanne)

To make sure the team are performing as they should perform, being identifying issues quickly and resolving them.

(Jane)

They want us to make it work, make sure it's economically viable too, and improve quality, those sorts of things.

(Phil)

Overall it appeared that middle managers felt that senior managers within their organisations were supportive but they were clear about their responsibilities as Richard put it 'the buck stops with us'. There was evidence that the new middle managers were well supported by their line managers as they negotiated aspects of their roles:

My boss is very supportive and she will show me how to do things.

(Laura)

I meet with my director every week for half an hour, well I can ring her any time anyway which is really key just for those random questions.

(Lucy)

It was clear that the managers, in general, had positive relationships with senior management teams who saw the role as essential to the success of the college. This recognition of the importance of the role lent status and validity to the position and it was clear that many of the managers felt their contribution was valued.

4.6 Views on leadership and management

4.6.1 Defining leadership and management

All participants were asked to explain the difference in their view between leadership and management. This was considered to be an interesting question by many of the participants who reflected for some time before responding. The responses varied from the extremely short 'inspiring and doing' offered by Sally, to much longer explanations. The responses have been summarised in Table 4.1.

	Leadership	Management
Ruth	<i>Leadership is about where you are going in the future, how you are going to help your team and department develop</i>	<i>Management is all about functional day to day working</i>
Ben	<i>A leader is about where you are going and how you are going to get there.</i>	<i>A manager makes sure things get done.</i>
Jane	<i>Leadership is about inspiring staff to want to do better, so it's about role modelling values and best practice.</i>	<i>Management is the day to day operational, making sure everybody's in the right place at the right time</i>
Susanne	<i>Leading you have to provide a vision and you have to provide inspiration.</i>	<i>Pulling the strings and making it happen</i>
Mike	<i>A leader would look at next year, the future development providing a dream, a vision or an aspiration</i>	<i>A manager will manage day to day, will manage this month maybe even this year.</i>
Jim	<i>Leadership is about vision, about knowing where you are and where you need to get to</i>	<i>Management is around day to day and systems and achieving consistency and competency.</i>
Phil	<i>Leadership is to do with strategic direction, it's to do with culture.</i>	<i>Management is making it all work.</i>
Sally	<i>Inspiring</i>	<i>Doing</i>
Richard	<i>Leadership is leading people by example and keeping them focused</i>	<i>Management is control within parameters so you are managing people to a criteria [sic].</i>
Laura	<i>A leader is probably somebody who drives things forward, makes it better, always sees the opportunities</i>	<i>A manager is somebody that manages the task at hand, manages the here and now.</i>
Lucy	<i>Being a role model, gaining respect</i>	<i>Management to achieve a task or get the department where it needs to be</i>
Kate	<i>Leadership is being a role model, being able to inspire a team and take things forward.</i>	<i>Management is making sure the function of the department really works.</i>

Table 4.1 Participants' Views on Leadership and Management

It is clear, from the responses, that leadership is seen as being concerned with the future strategic direction of the department or organisation. This involved being aware of the policy context within the sector and scanning the environment to be able to address new targets and priorities effectively. There was also a strong element of vision within this, setting the direction or goal for the team to

aspire to. Some viewed the leader as a role model, leading by example, setting the standard and in this way moving the team forward. Inspiring or providing inspiration was seen as key to this process. In summary it appeared that leadership was concerned with 'where you were going' as a department or organisation, seeing the opportunities and taking things forward. In contrast management was seen as functional and operational, actually getting the job done on a day-to-day basis and making it happen. The manager would work with the systems in place to make sure the department functions smoothly. One participant spoke about consistency and competency as a part of the manager's role. It was seen as an essential role to ensure that things got done and that the department was able to function effectively.

4.6.2 Enacting leadership and management

Participants were clear that there was a difference between the two from a purely theoretical standpoint but found it harder to articulate this in terms of their role. When questioned on whether they saw their current role as one of leadership or management, all participants said it was both and that it was hard to disassociate the two roles. For many the lines between leadership and management were blurred and there was not a distinct boundary between them; however management often came out as the stronger element of the role.

There are definitely elements of both but, primarily, it's a manager.

(Ruth)

I suppose I am doing both with a management bias to it.

(Ben)

I'd like to think I am both. It varies on the need of the moment.

(Mike)

I think I'm pretty clear as a manager. The majority of time I spend on management.

(Phil)

This was due to the large number of organisational duties that were undertaken as part of the role. When asked what they saw as the main function of their role,

they clearly saw it as making sure their departments functioned effectively on a day-to-day basis:

I'm responsible for making sure it works, that's how I see it.

(Phil)

I think it's just making sure that all the cogs in the area work together successfully.

(Susanne)

I need to make sure all my team are functioning if they are functioning the department is functioning at that's the crux of it.

(Kate)

I would say it would be ensuring the smooth running of the curriculum, ensuring that we meet our KPI [key performance indicator] targets, making sure we bring in extra income and, yes, just ensuring the smooth running for staff and for students.

(Laura)

Their focus was clearly on keeping everything running smoothly for the benefit of the staff and students. They needed to ensure their departments were performing and that the students were getting a good experience. All participants were aware of the need to meet targets and monitor performance although this came through more strongly in interviews with new middle managers than those who had been in position for some time. This is not to say that experienced middle managers were unconcerned with these, rather that they saw them as part of the bigger picture. This locates the role as one of a manager, getting things done and keeping everything on track and the participants could clearly identify with this.

For those who had been in post as a middle manager for longer the leadership aspects were more established as can be seen below from Susanne, an experienced manager, who sees her role as both leadership and management but whose experience has given her the confidence to focus more on strategy:

I think a bit of both and probably in the past two years it might have gone more into a leadership role than it has done previously and, I think, part of that is my own personal development and growing with experience and, I think, it's also having confidence to step back and let your team do.

For some there was a frustration that the day-to-day activities of management stopped them from carrying out a leadership role. This links back to the issues around time management, and that the difficulties with this aspect of the role can prevent them from taking a more strategic view, as shown in the following quotes:

I would love it to be both. At the moment I feel like it is just management due to the sheer volume of work.

(Laura)

I think for leadership there is a lot more forward thinking and I think the sad thing is we don't have time to do that. Time is occupied in our daily management role.

(Ruth)

The problems around delegation could also impact on this as Ben describes:

I am frustrated that I don't have more curriculum managers, to enable them to manage and administer and which would free me up to provide and be more leadership focused.

These comments appear to infer that leadership takes time and the management work undertaken means there is no room for leadership activities. Leadership is presented as a separate activity that gets squeezed out due to the pressures of daily work. This is particularly evident in comments made by newer middle managers:

If I could have the time to get my head around that and get my head around where I would like to kind of move to instead of doing the day to day stuff all the time it would be fantastic.

(Laura)

Linking back to comments made when they were asked how senior management viewed the role there is some contradiction. For example, Laura said they would see the role as 'driving the department forward' and Susanne referred to managers 'providing leadership and taking the college where the senior team want it to go'. This suggests that senior management view the role as having more of a leadership aspect. The managers also spoke of the importance of

forward planning, spotting what is on the horizon and being ready for it (sometimes referred to as environmental scanning), which they had previously described as leadership activities. This locates the role as one of leader providing direction and taking the department forward.

In separating the two, participants more readily identified themselves as managers despite the fact that the roles they described clearly included aspects of leadership. There was evidence that the middle managers were drawing on aspects of both leadership and management on a daily basis to ensure their department was successful. As Jim and Lucy explained:

You are working on two levels really, sort of a parallel universe, you are trying to ensure that the college and therefore your own area is moving correctly strategically [leadership], and then operationally, which is the management.

(Jim)

I would see them [leadership and management] working very, very, closely together because I think without one another you wouldn't necessarily be as successful potentially in that [middle management] role.

(Lucy)

When questioned, many participants found it hard to draw out specific examples of activities which were categorised as leadership, as this was closely intertwined with their management role. The extended quote from Jim demonstrates how closely the two aspects work together in the role:

Leadership requires other qualities, I think, so you need to be regarded well, you need to have integrity in what you are doing, so your subject knowledge, your awareness of the curriculum, those aspects come into play, how you allocate and manage resources, not just people but, you know, the other things that go along with it, the resources that make things happen. So the leadership is really about knowing where you are and where you need to get to and what you do in between is probably management, if you follow me, and I think as a leader you've got to have a more open mind and sometimes make more difficult decisions, strategically, than some managers do. Sometimes you might have to take a leadership decision about what happens to a course and it's not just a management decision you would have to say, 'well this course will have to end' and then manage the outcome of that decision but the leadership decision is, we are going to have to close it.

Managers were making strategic decisions about the future direction of their teams and they then had to manage the impact of these decisions, working to keep the staff on board and moving forward.

4.6.3 Leading a team

The one area where there did appear to be consistency in views on leadership was around interactions with staff. All the participants interviewed acted as line managers and discussed the importance of leading their teams. As Richard, Kate and Jim explain:

I think when you are with staff and members of your staff on a one-to-one basis, either formally or informally, you need to be more of a leader than a manager.

(Richard)

I think it's so important that you are leading your team, just as important as the course tutors leading a team of students. The staff are like my tutor group and I need to make sure that they are all performing.

(Kate)

I think you have got to be a leader of men in terms of... because there are no other direct leaders within the institution so you have to take that responsibility and take it seriously because what you say and do has an impact.

(Jim)

Leading a team and acting as a role model were seen as important aspects for the managers who understood the need to provide direction to their staff to ensure their department's success.

The middle managers were evidently blending aspects of leadership and management together in their daily roles but when questioned were more likely to identify themselves as primarily in a management position. However, when exploring aspects of their role and involvement in strategy it was clear that there were leadership activities happening. There was considerable similarity in their descriptions of what constituted leadership and management, however this was

harder to unpick when it came to reflections on their own role. This is because the two aspects appear to be working together depending on the need of the moment.

4.7 Views on progression

From the 12 participants, two were aspiring to senior management roles, four would consider it and six were definitely not looking to move to senior leadership. Through reviewing the transcripts there is the impression that there are fewer senior management posts available in the land-based sector to progress to. This could be due to two factors, firstly, leaner senior management teams have led to a reduction in senior and executive level posts, and secondly, the reduction in specialist land-based colleges means an accompanying reduction in senior positions.

Most participants felt their current role was 'a good fit for their skills set'. Those who did not want to progress to senior posts were quick to stress that this was not due to a lack of ambition rather that they enjoyed their current role and in many cases the link with the students and practical resources. As Susanne explained 'I think that to go up the ladder would take me too far away from the reason I came in, in the first place' referring to the desire to work with animals and train students. Certainly, maintaining this tangible connection with the resource and students was key for many.

It is important to note that whilst the middle managers identified the challenges with their role, they were very positive about the job and the sector. As mentioned, many had held the role for a number of years and had developed the skills and experience needed to be successful in this challenging environment. None of the managers interviewed expressed the desire to leave the sector, and the less experienced felt their ability to meet the demands of the role would develop with time.

There is no doubt that the current situation in the FE sector is difficult, particularly financially. Whilst it was acknowledged that there were challenges in the sector, for them it was very much business as usual. They focused on what they could

do rather than on what they couldn't and were creative in finding solutions. As Kate explains:

I do think there are some challenges but I do think it's also quite an exciting role, where we can actually make changes to the whole organisation and we are actually supported by senior leadership.

As already discussed many felt that their role had developed over the years and that this provided challenge and increasing levels of responsibility so they did not feel the need to apply for more senior roles. As Ben explained:

I suppose I am doing this job and am working quite hard at doing this job and I probably don't see the future too clearly, right now, in terms of where this is going to go. This is providing me with sufficient challenge, making sure we are generating success rates of 90%.

Those interviewed also felt they were in a position to make a difference or have an impact on the students' experience. For many this was the reason they had taken the role and what made it attractive to them. Others spoke about the opportunities to engage young people with land-based subjects and rural communities and make a difference to their lives. The quotes from Susanne and Ben demonstrate their commitment to the learners:

I think from a personal perspective the most fantastic opportunity is to develop the students as those all-rounded employable individuals, that's the key to it all.

(Susanne)

I am committed that the more we are doing the right training and education and a really interesting and ambitious enrichment programme we have a chance to draw in new learners.

(Ben)

It was clear that middle management was not seen as a stepping stone to senior management. It was a challenging role that enabled them to use a variety of high level skills as Sally explains:

To work within land-based is a joy. It's a different way of working really, I like how it changes every half an hour. You use your problem solving skills, which I prefer to do, it's just challenge the whole time.

Land-based colleges are by their nature often in rural settings with vast expanses of green space around them. Managers spoke positively about their workplaces

and often, either before or after the interview, would talk about what a beautiful setting they worked in.

Land-based colleges are special, I think they are wonderful places to work, I have visited most land-based colleges for one reason or another and they are beautiful places. It's the estate that you are in. There are opportunities in terms of job satisfaction and job enjoyment from the environment that you work in. I think it's very much an environmental aspect and it's a positive thing.

(Jane)

This appeared to have a positive impact on their experience. They may also have put many years' effort into building up and developing a resource and a staff team and again this influenced their decision to remain in their current post.

4.8 Middle management job descriptions

Job descriptions were obtained for only three of the participants so it is not possible to draw conclusions from this small sample. Whilst these were requested it became too difficult to obtain these and I did not want to send repeat reminders to participants who had already given up their time for free. The intention had been to review the job descriptions identifying expectations of leadership and management activities from the verbs used in setting out the requirements of the role as used by O'Sullivan, Thody and Wood (2000) in their analysis of job descriptions. The sample size was judged too small for this to be appropriate. However two observations could be made; firstly, of the three jobs descriptions the most recently written (in 2014) employed the term leader and leadership more frequently than the other two (written in 2010 and 2012). Secondly, only the most recent included a statement about representing the college externally. This perhaps provides evidence to support the issues already discussed that leadership has become a more fashionable term than management and that the role now includes a much wider outreach and marketing aspect, referred to as 'liaison' by Briggs (2005). There was considerable variation in the number of responsibilities listed ranging from a succinct five to a wide ranging 24. It also proved difficult to obtain organisation charts, therefore participants were asked to describe the structure of the

organisation during the interview to compensate for this.

Each of the colleges set out their vision and values on their website and there was considerable similarity in these. They all aimed to provide outstanding, exceptional or world class education and training in the land-based sector which meets the needs of the region they are located in. For some this went wider, aiming for not just local and regional recognition but also national. Others also included reference to learner success or success for all within their vision.

4.9 Summary

A total of 12 interviews were conducted with middle managers from five colleges with land-based provision in England during the summer of 2016. This comprised of three specialist and two general FE colleges. The managers interviewed covered all land-based subject areas, as well as foundation learning and higher education. There was considerable similarity in the views expressed by the middle managers despite the fact they came from several different colleges across England and it was possible to draw out key themes from their responses.

These seven key themes were shared with the participants to enable them to review and comment on them. The first theme was the overall positivity from those interviewed about land-based education and the opportunities for learners. Despite the difficult and turbulent situation within the FE sector as a whole, managers were flexible and creative in their approaches to dealing with this, as one interviewee commented 'it's about focusing on what you can do'. Managers felt that they were able to make a difference and have a positive impact on the experience of the learners in their areas. This along with the opportunity to maintain a link with their vocational area of interest was important to them.

The second theme focused on development of the role; over half the managers interviewed had been with their current employer for over 10 years and during this time had seen an increase in work intensification. In many cases multiple restructures had resulted in leaner senior management teams and development of the middle manager's role. This often include an expansion in the number of subject areas managed or increased focus on partnerships and project work.

The diverse nature of the job could lead to lack of role clarity and at times role overload. This was more of an issue for new managers who struggled with time management. Experienced managers were still subject to these pressures but had become more adept at identifying and prioritising tasks throughout the day described by one interviewee as 'going with what's happening now'.

The third theme concerns the similarity in the roles and tasks undertaken as described by the managers. Finding quiet time to focus on aspects of the role such as timetabling or report writing was difficult and more likely to occur outside the normal working day, for example, early mornings or after 5pm. Most managers also had responsibility for overseeing the physical resources within their areas usually with the support of a farm, stable or animal centre manager or similar. For many this enabled them to maintain a strong practical link with their vocational area of interest but did add pressure, contributing to the wide and varied nature of the role. The importance of getting out and walking round the resources to meet the students, talk to the staff and generally 'see what is going on' was mentioned by many. This enabled the managers to maintain a high profile and to gather valuable information about what was happening in their areas, allowing them to identify and address issues they may otherwise have not been aware of.

The fourth theme focused on the management of staff. Comments made by managers reflected a strong commitment to supporting their staff and encouraging their professional development. The importance of getting staff in the right roles and ensuring they have the conditions to do a good job, through timetabling and allocation of resources was evident. Being the 'go to' person and having to undertake problem solving activities was mentioned, however more experienced managers spoke about using a coaching approach to create a more self-sufficient team who were able to come up with their own solutions. The role of being in the middle of the organisation and having to communicate policies and directives from the senior team to staff as well as feeding information from their staff back up the chain was clearly articulated. Overall managers spoke positively about their teams and this aspect of their role was clearly significant with staff issues taking up on average 50% of their time. In general the managers had

positive relationships with the senior management teams who saw the role of middle manager as essential to the success of the college.

The fifth theme concerned the impact of the current situation in the FE sector on the middle management role. All those interviewed were highly aware of recent policies and strategies within the FE sector and could articulate how these had impacted on their role. Whilst there was an awareness of area reviews they did not feature heavily in the discussions. Those in post longer noted an increase in paperwork and administrative aspects of the role, whilst they understood the need for this they felt that in some cases it could be described as 'the tail wagging the dog'. For many finance formed a large part of the role including managing budgets, generating commercial revenue and ensuring recruitment and therefore income targets were met. The managers were able to retain some autonomy when it came to their own departments although those in post for longer had seen the amount of autonomy decrease over the years. Managers were able to influence development of the resources, recommend the introduction of new courses or addition of new subject areas and devise the curriculum to meet the needs of their learners. More experienced managers spoke about the constant need to spot what is coming on the horizon and prepare for it, working with senior teams to ensure they were ready to meet new challenges. This focus on being one step ahead of the game was seen as key to ensuring the success of not just their area but the whole organisation. Those experienced managers appeared to have become adept at this forward planning and strategic thinking and saw it as a key part of the role. This was described by one manager as 'thinking all the time about change'. This was accepted by managers as normal within the sector although that did not mean they were all happy with the situation but rather accepted that you had to work with it not against it.

The sixth theme identified was in regard to the leadership and management aspects of the role. The descriptions given of the difference between leadership and management by participants were very similar. In descriptions of their roles the managers were clearly enacting aspects of both leadership and management but when questioned were more likely to identify themselves as primarily in a management position. For many the lines between leadership and management were blurred and with no distinct boundary between them. For some there was

a frustration that the day-to-day activities of management stopped them from carrying out a leadership role as there was a lack of time to reflect on and think about leadership issues. These comments appear to infer that leadership takes time and the management work undertaken means there is no room for leadership activities which get squeezed out due to the pressures of daily work. The one area where there did appear to be consistency in views on leadership was around interactions with staff and the importance of providing leadership for the team.

Finally, a theme emerged in regard to career progression to senior roles. There appeared to be the perception that there are fewer senior management posts available in the land-based sector as a result of mergers and restructures resulting in leaner senior management teams. Most participants felt their current role was 'a good fit for their skills set'. Those who did not want to progress to senior posts were quick to stress that this was not due to a lack of ambition rather that they enjoyed their current role and in many cases the link with the students and practical resources. The continually evolving nature of the middle manager's role provided adequate interest and challenge, this role expansion coupled with growing levels of experience and authority appeared to influence positively the retention of the managers in this study.

In the following chapter the findings of the study will be analysed with reference to the literature on the subject reviewed in Chapter Two. Chapter Six will then conclude the study by reflecting on whether the research questions have been answered.

CHAPTER 5 Discussion of the Main Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings from the 12 interviews with middle managers in the land-based sector with reference to the earlier reviewed literature. It begins with a brief description of the situation within the FE sector during the summer of 2016 when the interviews were carried out to provide context for the study. This is followed by a reflection on the attitudes of the managers in the research study which despite the context were incredibly positive. The key themes identified are explored including; development of the role and work intensification; issues around the management of staff and resources; policy influence and involvement with strategy; and views on leadership and management. Throughout the chapter reference will be made to the relevant literature and new studies and ideas introduced where appropriate.

5.2 Perceptions of the middle managers

The summer of 2016 could be viewed as particularly challenging for the further education sector. The drastic funding cuts (Keep, 2014) combined with an increasing number of colleges being rated financially inadequate put considerable pressure on those working in the sector to do more for less. The Government's programme of area reviews was well underway and likely to result in further mergers within the sector. Media reporting of the negative comments made by the then head of Ofsted, Michael Wilshaw, about the sector's poor performance (Belgutay, 2016) did little to improve morale. In addition the Governments continued use of policy levers and funding methodology to drive changes relating to programmes of study, English and maths and apprenticeships required rapid responses in terms of curriculum design and delivery. It was against this backdrop that the interviews were conducted.

In spite of the turbulent situation in the sector the overall mood from the participants was positive. Whilst the managers were fully aware of and involved in responses to the current issues, their focus appeared to be on maintaining

'business as usual'. The staff interviewed in this study had been with the same organisations for a number of years and demonstrated high levels of institutional loyalty (50% of those interviewed had worked for over ten years for the same employer). Turnover rates in land-based education are lower than many other sectors and stood at 10.9% for academic staff in the year 2013/14 (ETF, 2014) against an average 15.4% for academic staff across all sectors, although the reasons for this are unclear. There was anecdotal evidence that the workplace setting had a positive impact on the managers in this study. The rural location of the colleges and green space around them was commented on in terms such as 'wonderful places' and 'lovely settings' interviewees enjoyed working in these locations, it is possible that this could have a positive effect on retention.

Smith and O'Leary (2013) put forward a different view on staff positivity describing how the current austerity measures have led to uncertainty in the sector and a staff member who speaks in a negative terms about their experiences may be putting their future employment at risk. In addition, Lea and Simmons (2012) found anecdotal evidence that FE colleagues often feel that they cannot speak out freely against their own senior managers when compared to the more carefully considered ways in which HE academics have been able to use their disciplines as protective 'tribes and territories' (Trowler and Becher, 2001). Within FE there is competitive pressure and a requirement to present a positive face to the public and this means that 'staff may understandably be reluctant to divulge the negatives as well as the positives' (Lumby and Simkins, 2002, p. 7).

However I believe that despite the negative views on the state of sector from external observers, many staff within the sector remain focused on the positive role the sector has to play in the lives of young people and this was certainly evidenced during the interviews. Participants spoke of the opportunity to 'develop students into all round employable individuals' through delivering 'the right training and education'. They appeared to take a holistic view which encompassed all aspects of development, including the need to deliver 'interesting and ambitious enrichment programmes'. They valued the opportunities the role presented them with to engage young people in learning about the land-based sector and have a positive impact on rural communities and industries. Despite the difficult situation in the sector they described being able to

'have an impact' and 'make a difference' which I suggest demonstrates positivity and strong moral purpose. Similarly Barker (2007) in his study of middle managers in a large FE college found that they felt good about the impact their work had.

I agree with Cordingly and Crisp (2016, p. 14) that 'the further education sector in England continues to prove itself flexible and adaptive to the many and changing demands made of it'. Certainly the managers interviewed spoke about being creative and finding solutions which would allow them to continue to provide a high quality experience for their learners despite challenging situations in regard to funding. In addition it appeared that the role of middle manager was well recognised and valued within the colleges. In common with findings in the literature describing them the engine or kingpin (Bubb and Earley, 2007), senior management in their organisations had described the role as vital, pivotal and the key to success for the whole college. This validation gave the role credibility and status and appeared to have a positive impact on the experiences of the majority of the managers interviewed, who felt their contributions to the organisation were valued. There were clearly issues around funding, reduction in timetabled hours and focus on the wider curriculum which affected them, however they remained focused on providing a high quality student experience.

5.3 The middle management role

In common with findings in the literature review, multiple terms were found to describe similar middle management roles for example; head of department, assistant director and curriculum manager. Many had obtained their position following a restructure. This restructuring (often on multiple occasions) referred to by the participants supports the claim by Smith (2014) that restructuring has become a defining feature of FE, with the merging of subject areas, creating new larger departments. This process was evident in the current study where new departments and posts were being created with responsibility for maths and English and apprenticeships in response to the latest Government policies and provides evidence of the ongoing change and turbulence caused by policy levers. Land-based has been particularly affected by the trend towards mergers and this

may have contributed to restructuring experienced by participants in merged colleges. Despite this all the participants described their organisation as a fairly traditional hierarchical structure with a Principal supported by a SLT at the top, with the middle managers below them and then the teaching staff at various levels depending on the exact nature of their role. Some of the teaching staff acted in roles such as course manager or programme leader providing support to the middle managers. Whilst in many cases restructuring had resulted in a reduction of the number of senior posts creating leaner teams, they could still be portrayed as pyramidal.

5.3.1 Role expansion

As previously mentioned over half the managers interviewed had been with their current employer for more than ten years and during this time had seen significant work intensification as a result of restructures and accompanying reduction in the size of SLTs. This work intensification included an expansion in the number of subject areas managed or increased focus on partnerships and project work. There was evidence that this had led to some devolution of the senior role into middle management and the boundaries between roles had become porous (Davies, 2005). One of the participants expressed the view that 'although they felt they had risen in seniority within the college due to restructures and changes in job role, they were still classed as middle management'. This supports the findings by Gleeson and Knights (2008, p. 60) that 'middle managers' work practices can be significantly more complex, innovative and 'senior' than their designation implies'. On one side this increased responsibility had created more challenging and fulfilling roles, with more opportunities to problem solve, be creative and have greater strategic input. The role expansion described by the managers in this study coupled with their growing levels of experience and authority appeared to positively influence their retention. The roles were acknowledged as challenging but this sustained their interest and engagement. The other side to this development however is longer working hours and as observed by Briggs (2006) unrealistically heavy responsibilities for coordinating a range of functions which could lead to role overload.

5.3.2 Core function of the role

There was a great deal of similarity in the role and the tasks undertaken as described by the managers despite the fact they worked in different organisations across England. The core function of the role was the management of the curriculum, including the staff and resources required for its delivery. Activities related to monitoring budgets and identifying additional sources of income which involved networking and liaison outside the organisation featured prominently, as did data driven tasks which were used to monitor each department's performance. These core tasks were central to the role and this was replicated in discussions with each of the managers. In common with many earlier studies, for example Page (2011a) which reported on the unpredictable and chaotic nature of the role, the managers in this study described it as fragmented and jumbled, using terms such as plate spinning, running on the spot and firefighting. The role was characterised as fluid in nature and there was no such thing as a typical day. Many stated they were responsible for 'everything' which replicates the findings of Page (2011a, p. 109) who in his study of first tier managers found that 'virtually every occurrence was perceived to be in their remit'. The boundaries of the role were not well defined (Page, 2011b) and this led to the wide variety of issues, tasks, queries and requests that came to them on a daily basis, described by one participant as a 'constant barrage'. There was evidence that priorities shifted according to the time of year and important deadlines such as those set for the completion of timetabling or the self-assessment report. The high workloads, compounded by a lack of role clarity noted in this study are a recurrent theme in the literature (Briggs, 2002; Earley and Fletcher-Campbell, 1993; Page, 2013) and this impacted on the work of newly appointed managers in particular. From the responses it would appear that the lack of clarity is not related to the core function of the role but arises from the fact that the boundaries of the role are vague and difficult to define leading to an ever increasing number of tasks and requests to complete.

5.3.3 Time management

The differences between new and experienced managers in the study were most evident in issues around workload and time management. Those new in post tried to respond to every single request and demand as they arose, they could be classified as 'willing compliers' (Gleeson and Shain, 1999b, p. 474), newly appointed and keen to fulfil the demands of the role and the expectations of the senior management team. However, whilst they were fully conversant with the managerialist agenda and tried to comply with every request, they still maintained a strong focus on the student, but this, combined with balancing the wide and varied demands of the role, put them under considerable pressure. For one manager this had led to a situation where they felt that trying to achieve a work life balance was impossible.

Experienced managers were still subject to these pressures but had become more adept at identifying and prioritising tasks throughout the day described by one participant as 'going with what's happening now', they knew what was urgent, important or could be left until later. Experienced managers were clearly creative in finding ways to work within, rather than against the managerialist culture and keep the student at the centre of everything they did. They retained a strong moral purpose, that is their main focus was to make a difference in the lives of the students (Fullan, 2002), retaining a commitment to professional and educational values. This approach fits the description of strategic compliance (Gleeson and Shain, 1999b) explored in the literature review. Strategic compliers are committed to their professional values and the needs of the learners but conform to aspects of managerialism (Orr, 2012).

The role of the middle manager requires constant juggling of priorities, deciding where to focus time and effort and the need to balance present and future demands. This can be problematic because whilst the role of middle leader is often reactive and unpredictable, in common with research by Irvine and Brundrett (2016) in the secondary sector, participants found the lack of a clearly structured role challenging, particularly during the early period of their appointment. Their research identified the importance of 'accumulating experience that will enable the novice middle leader to construct a wider

repertoire of personal scripts on which they can draw' (op cit) leading to swifter decision making, however the only way to get that experience is through carrying out the role. I suggest that the knowledge and experience gained during the early stages of appointment can be used by individuals to learn how to comply strategically. This strategic compliance is not just on the basis of defending the needs of the learners but I argue is a key part of managing the demands of the role.

5.3.4 Changing focus of the role

Unlike earlier studies (Briggs, 2003b; Gleeson and Shain, 1999b) teaching generally formed a small part of the role as the focus had moved away from classroom delivery and pedagogical concerns. This departure from the requirement to teach, to a role which is concerned purely with management is a further progression of the situation described over a decade ago by Briggs (2005) who identified that managers had started to move away from pedagogical aspects to focus on income generation, accountability and administrative tasks. Although the managers still had an overview of teaching, learning and assessment they were supported in this by an advanced practitioner or similar who focused on this aspect. There is very little research on the advanced practitioner role, however generally their role is to support the manager in relation to improving the quality of teaching and learning.

It is useful briefly to reflect on the differences between the role of the middle leaders in schools and the middle manager within FE. In schools the work of middle leaders is focused on pupil progress through improvement of teaching, learning and assessment and there are well defined and measureable outcomes in regard to this. There are also recognised training programmes aimed at developing middle leaders in schools. I consider that within FE the role of middle manager is much less well defined and is wider and more varied in its remit, the two roles are not comparable in terms of core purpose. In addition the differences between how schools and FE are funded impacts on managers responsible for designing and delivering the curriculum.

It has been suggested that following incorporation there was a shift from the Head of Department role based upon the authority of subject knowledge and expertise to one based on operational and business aspects (Briggs, 2001). However in this study the managers did have a vocational background in the land-based areas they were managing or in the land-based sector more generally. The importance of having specialist knowledge was commented on during the interviews, with several participants observing that having a strong vocational background in land-based subjects gave you credibility in eyes of the staff you were managing. In almost all cases they retained a strong interest and professional link with their vocational sector. This provides evidence to support the model of dual professionalism widely promoted within the FE sector during the 2000s (Plowright and Barr, 2012). One commented that, 'it's not that you couldn't manage it if you weren't a specialist but it would make it a lot harder' and another commenting that knowledge of the sector is essential to make a success of the area. As discussed earlier, most of the managers had responsibility for overseeing the physical resources within their areas usually with the support of a farm, stable or animal centre manager or similar. They were familiar with the land-based industry and the specialist opportunities available to young people. They appeared to work hard to balance their responsibilities to college performance targets (retention, success, progression) with their responsibilities for the standards and expectations of the professions that the students were to enter (Coffield *et al.*, 2008).

Further to the dual professionalism identified above, there was evidence to support the concept proposed by Hodgson and Spours (2015) of triple professionalism and the development of skills and knowledge which enables individuals to engage and collaborate at many levels. Several of the managers spoke about looking for new sources of income and the importance of networking outside of the organisation to identify opportunities to develop new provision. Not all the managers were comfortable with this aspect of the role however which was considered to be more business than education in its focus. Whilst a detailed exploration of professionalism of the managers is outside the scope of this study, the dualism between monitoring and accountability on one hand and individual agency on the other, were evident in their discussions of practice.

5.3.5 Managerialism

The continued impact of managerialism in the sector was evident in the participants' responses. Those in post longer noted an increase in paperwork and administrative aspects of the role, and the development of a culture described by Ball (2003, p. 215) as one that 'requires individual practitioners to organise themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations'. The language used by the managers also demonstrated how managerialist practices were embedded in their work referring to, for example, key performance indicators, targets, performance reviews and business plans. All participants were acutely aware of the need to meet targets and monitor performance. This came through particularly strongly in interviews, with new middle managers who had only experienced FE in this way. They considered this focus on quantitative data as normal practice supporting the views of Smith and O'Leary (2013) that managerialist positivism is becoming normalised within the sector.

The current Government continues to exert control over colleges through funding methodology and accountability measures. This coupled with austerity measures which have led to an overall reduction in funding for the sector meant that issues around finance, funding and the need to make a contribution to the organisation were raised by many of the managers. This included managing budgets, generating commercial revenue and ensuring recruitment and therefore income targets were met. There was a pressure to ensure that 'they were not spending too much money' and that they had considered the 'economics of what they were doing'. It was clear that managers felt all their staff needed to understand how funding impacted on decisions about the courses they were going to deliver, as this linked to recruitment, curriculum planning, staff workloads and job security. This supports findings by Smith and O'Leary (2013), that being aware of and understanding funding streams and the impact of these on college courses is essential for all staff not just college managers. A study by Mercer, Whitehead and Kaparou (2015) researching college leadership found that FE Principals spent most of their time trying to ensure their institutions financial viability. In the current climate where FE colleges are facing large deficits (Keep, 2014) this preoccupation at all levels is understandable.

It is now 24 years since incorporation and as new middle managers are appointed who are accustomed to this version of further education so the culture of managerialist positivism (Smith and O'Leary, 2013) becomes embedded in the way the role is enacted. Certainly strategic compliance (Gleeson and Shain, 1999b) was still evident in the practice of the experienced managers but it appeared to align with that described by Coffield *et al.* (2008) as a struggle between the institution and the system rather than between middle and senior managers or middle managers and lecturing staff. They were aware that policy change was driven by Government or other external bodies and the institution's role was in responding to these changes. Whilst many of the themes identified in this section are in common with earlier studies (Avis, 2005; Orr, 2012) such as intensification of labour, increased administration and a focus on performance measures, it would be wrong to portray the managers as powerless and down trodden - whilst they accepted the necessity of a target-driven culture, they were not driven by it (Page, 2013). It is important to reiterate that although the middle managers identified the challenges with their role, they were very positive about the job and the sector. Many had worked in the sector for an extended period and I argue had developed resilience alongside the skills needed to perform the role. This resilience can be defined as the 'capacity to manage the unavoidable uncertainties and function well over time' (Gu and Day, 2013, p. 39). Those new to the role understandably struggled with these 'uncertainties' and this impacted on both time management and workload; however they were confident that this would improve with experience. This is a departure from the down trodden and overworked view of managers often presented in the literature particularly in the early days post incorporation. None of the managers interviewed expressed a desire to leave the FE sector, and the less experienced felt their ability to meet the demands of the role would develop with time.

5.4 Management of staff and resources

In common with other studies of first tier and middle managers many of the participants had been promoted from within their teams and now managed former colleagues. However unlike other studies (Page, 2013) this did not appear to

cause them issues in their day to day management, instead they spoke about how supportive their teams were. All those interviewed line managed staff, ranging in number from three or four up to 28 individuals. Comments made by managers reflected a strong commitment to supporting their staff and encouraging their professional development. The importance of getting staff in the right roles and ensuring they have the conditions to do a good job, through appropriate timetabling and allocation of resources was evident.

Overall managers spoke positively about their teams and this aspect of their role was clearly significant with staff issues taking up on average 50% of their time. Comments made by the interviewees reflected their commitment to supporting and developing the individuals in their team. The managers were usually located near or with their teams and had an open door policy so that they were available to staff at all times. They were in regular contact with their team members and took steps to ensure and enhance that contact (Aubrey-Hopkins and James, 2003). Being the 'go to' person and having to undertake problem solving activities was common, however experienced managers spoke about using a coaching approach to create a more self-sufficient team who were able to come up with their own solutions. Between 2003 and 2013 the Learning and Skills Development Service (LSIS) developed and widely promoted a model based on peer coaching to promote and sustain continuous improvements in teaching and learning across the FE sector. Specialist training and resources were available to support the development of subject learning coaches (SLCs) who would act as change agents within their organisations (Hobson *et al.*, 2015). Managers who had been in the sector for a number of years were aware of this programme and several had participated in it and thought it valuable. Whilst LSIS no longer exists there was evidence of a legacy from this period in comments made by some of the participants who were still using the coaching methods they had learnt in the management of their teams. Whilst an exploration of the use of coaching is outside the scope of this study, as an individual who completed the SLC programme and draws on those skills in my own practice, it is interesting to reflect on the lasting impact it has had on those who participated.

5.4.1 Management by wandering around

Nearly all the middle managers described the importance of getting out of the office and 'wandering around'. Management by wandering around (MBWA) was first developed by executives at Hewlett Packard in the 1970s as a communication strategy (Trueman, 1991) and was popularised by Peters and Waterman (1982) in their book 'In Search of Excellence'. Also known as management by walking about, it engages managers in the day to day processes and provides them with information about how things really are. It also enables managers to communicate through face to face interactions and give and receive feedback. This opportunity to make a connection with staff is key and can help to build trust and relationships. By walking around the site they were maintaining a high profile and were visible and accessible to both staff and students. It also demonstrates the manager's interest in the subject area and as well as in the organisation and the staff (Bell, 2000). The term 'wandering' is important as this relates to the unplanned and unstructured nature of the activity. The participants in this study either used this method or wanted to use it in managing their teams. One of the newer managers felt that they would love to be able to get round and 'show their face' but found it difficult to get away from the office. Experienced managers consciously made time to walk through their areas on a regular basis. For some managers this meant daily walk rounds, whilst for others it meant going round two or three times a week, what was important was 'being out there and being seen'. The wandering by itself is not enough and there is a danger that it will have little benefit if is done without listening and learning from the staff (Mears, 2009). However in this study the participants could provide examples of things they had observed or heard that they had been able to address or move forward. They were able to obtain information to help them make better decisions, enabling them to develop and improve their department and the organisation. Also whilst they were walking around observing, they could quality check the provision and resources and ensure safe practices were being followed. In this respect it played a key role in ensuring the success of the area and was therefore far more valuable than the 'wandering around' it was presented as by the managers.

Page (2013) describes how stressed first tier managers would remove themselves from their offices and walk round campus as a way to escape the pressures of work albeit temporarily. It could be that the wandering around described by the participants in this study did in fact also play a role in relieving stress. I can strongly identify both with this style of management and the benefits of getting out of the office and immersing oneself in what is going on in the teaching areas. Before completing this study I didn't realise that I was employing this method as a strategy but I recognise elements of my behaviour in its description such as giving and receiving feedback and demonstrating an interest in the staff which I hope makes them feel valued. I also question whether this management by walking around could also in fact be viewed as leadership as it comprises opportunities to motivate staff and to communicate the college's vision and values, practices which Buckner (2008) argues makes leadership more effective.

5.4.2 Bridging the gap between senior management and lecturers

Middle managers by the nature of their position occupy an area between the senior management and the teaching staff. The position described by Gleeson and Shain (1999b) where middle managers filter change in both directions between senior management and lecturers, buffering potential conflict and resistance from lecturing staff was evident in some of the interviews. Acting as the 'voice' for their team was mentioned by a number of the participants who felt it was important that the staff knew the manager would raise their concerns and support them with issues that arose. One participant mentioned how it was essential that the team could see that 'you were working for them' which supports findings by Busher (2005, p. 415) that middle managers (in schools) often 'acted as advocates for their colleagues' views to the senior management team'. Tensions which arise from being in the middle of the organisation and having to communicate policies and directives from the senior team to staff, as well as feeding information from their staff back up the chain was clearly articulated. The role involves drawing the two sides together and helping them to understand each other's position, managing the expectations of both senior managers and

academic staff (Leader, 2004). The tricky task of translating policy into practice referred to as 'acts of translation' by Spours, Coffield and Gregson (2007, p. 193), continues to be a defining feature of the middle managers' role.

There was however little evidence of the filtering described by Briggs (2005) where the managers shielded the teaching staff from the managerialism embodied by SLT's (Steer *et al.*, 2007). This could be because managerialism is now embedded in the practices of FE unlike in the early days post incorporation and staff are not shielded from it. One area where the middle managers did try to shield staff was by not increasing their workloads through delegation. Across all the managers there was agreement that there was little room for delegation. This was influenced by the inspection regime in the sector, one manager reflected that in the past if you were good, that was good enough, but now you need to strive for outstanding. Simmons and Thompson (2008, p. 615) argue that 'the effects of performativity are felt particularly sharply in FE'. Performativity describes a situation where staff are represented and encouraged to think about themselves as individuals who calculate about themselves, 'add value', to themselves, improve their productivity and strive for excellence (Ball, 2003, p. 217). Contact teaching hours are usually in the region of 24 per week within the sector and it was clear that the managers felt the teaching staff were already working hard and couldn't take on any more responsibilities. In common with the literature, middle managers often feel 'squeezed' from the top as senior managers pass down workload, as well as the bottom, where middle managers felt they could not delegate this work to other lecturers (Clarke and Newman, 1997). In some cases a reduction in the number of lower tier managers (such as course leaders) had further contributed to this pressure.

5.5 Policy influence and response

It was clear from the literature review that many (Earley, 1998; Glover *et al.*, 1998) interpret the role of manager as one of implementing strategy rather than creating it. However the findings of this study provided evidence of both top down and collective decision making with regard to strategy. Most managers mentioned being able to contribute towards the overall strategic direction of the college

through input via, for example, strategic planning meetings or discussions with the SLT. Policy changes which required a whole college response to ensure consistency were often led by the senior team. However, when it came to their own departments the managers had opportunities to act autonomously and felt it was important to focus their efforts in the areas where they could make an impact. They could influence development of the resources, recommend the introduction of new courses or addition of new subject areas and devise the curriculum to meet the needs of their learners. According to Simmons and Thompson (2008, p. 613) the 'layers of managerialism and performativity that characterise contemporary FE squeezes out opportunities to be creative'. The managers who had been in post for longer acknowledged that they had seen the amount of autonomy decrease over the years. Several acknowledged that there was less room for creativity in curriculum design and delivery due to awarding body specifications and requirements. However, they could provide a variety of enhancement opportunities including study tours and work experience opportunities which would bring unique elements to their area and attract students. They were still able to find space where they could have ownership and be creative and they valued this.

5.5.1 Thinking all the time about change

All participants agreed that constant change was normal within the sector. In common with earlier studies (Edward *et al.*, 2007) these changes came from many sources. It could be both external such as policy or funding requirements, and internal for example changes due to restructuring, in the data management or quality systems or related to teaching practice. Smith and O'Leary (2013) believe that staff have become accustomed to this constant policy change and that it is now a recognizable and distinctive feature of the FE sector. All those interviewed were highly aware of recent policies and strategies within the FE sector and could articulate how they had impacted on their role. Whilst there was an awareness of area reviews they did not feature heavily in the discussions.

More experienced managers spoke about the constant need to identify what is coming on the horizon and prepare for it (environmental scanning), working with senior teams to ensure they were ready to meet new challenges. This focus on

being one step ahead of the game was seen as key to ensuring the success of not just their area, but the whole organisation and was highlighted as a key factor in leading organisations in volatile times (Greany *et al.*, 2014). These experienced managers appeared to have become adept at horizon scanning and saw it as a key part of their role. They spoke about keeping up to date with what is going on in the sector, as this knowledge may enable them to anticipate or predict the next policy change or initiative. A FETL report stated that policy turbulence is a constant within the sector, which has become expert in responding to it (FETL 2016) and this research supports that statement. Policy turbulence was accepted by managers as normal within the sector, although that did not mean they were all happy with the situation but rather accepted that you had to work with it not against it. One manager described how you needed to be 'thinking all the time about change'. This responsiveness is referred to as 'reactionary and short-termist' by Smith and O'Leary (2013, p. 251) who see it as further evidence of the continued influence of managerialism in the sector. I agree with the views both in the literature and expressed by the participants that change is a defining feature of the sector. However, whilst responsiveness could be seen in a negative light I believe that the ability to respond and adapt quickly are key features in being successful as a manager, a department and as an organisation. This responsiveness is recognised and rewarded through favourable audit and inspection reports, providing an advantage in a competitive market place where you are seen to be leading on new initiatives rather than lagging behind.

5.6 Leadership and management

5.6.1 Defining leadership and management

The definitions of leadership and management given by the participants reflected those described in the literature (Fullan, 1991; Kotter, 1990) Leadership was considered to be about the future strategic direction of the department or organisation, setting the direction or goal for the team to aspire to. This involved inspiring and motivating others to want to achieve the goal. Seven of the participants indicated that leadership was about the future with comments such as 'it's about where you are going' and 'it's about knowing where you are and

where you need to get to'. This involved 'providing inspiration' and 'keeping people focused'. For most participants creating a vision was a key part of being a leader. Bush and Glover (2014) consider that whilst vision is regarded as an essential component of effective leadership, within education that vision has to conform to the expectations set by policy makers and inspection agencies. There was considerable similarity in the vision set by the colleges' in this study which provides evidence to support this, with all intending to provide outstanding land-based education which meets the needs of their region. Some of the participants felt that leaders should act as a role model, leading by example, setting the standard and in this way moving the team forward. In summary, there was agreement that leadership was about the future and taking the college forward, seeing opportunities and inspiring people to work towards them.

In contrast management was seen as functional and operational, essential to ensure that things got done and that the department was able to function effectively. Five of the participants mentioned management as being focused on day to day issues. It was all about 'making it happen' and ensuring that 'things get done'. It was rooted in the here and now and as one participant put it 'making sure everyone is in the right place at the right time'.

It is interesting that there is such similarity in the views on leadership and management. They align with the concise summaries articulated by for example Kotterman (2006) where management is tactical focusing on the here and now and leadership is strategic and focuses on the future, and Kotter (1990) where managers control and problem solve, whilst leaders motivate and inspire. For there to be such similarity in the views expressed indicates that there are commonly held views about the nature of leadership and management. However the definitions given by the participants were very narrow and although managers could clearly articulate the difference between the two from a theoretical standpoint they found it harder to separate them in their own practices.

5.6.2 Making sure it all works

In describing the main function of their role in the college participants focused on the management aspects; 'making sure it all works' stood out as the main priority.

In the discussions participants generally played down the leadership activities they were undertaking, categorising it as being about vision and strategy, 'the big picture stuff'. Their comments however demonstrated that they were providing direction for their departments through development and delivery of the curriculum and that they were clearly focused on the vision of providing an outstanding student experience. They supported and developed their teams, motivating them to produce good results and they spoke about accountability and responsibility for the work and performance of their area. These are activities that could fall into the category of leadership, as Lumby (2001, p. 12) notes 'leadership may be embodied in what people do, not what they say'. In general the managers had positive relationships with the senior management teams although some participants observed that they did not always understand the enormity of the role. Most felt that senior management saw their own role as one of providing leadership, maintaining high performance and taking the college in the right direction strategically although there was some dissonance here between this and their own view of the role which played down the more strategic and leadership aspects.

One area where there did appear to be consistency in views was around interactions with staff and providing leadership for the team and some referred to the importance of acting as a role model. As mentioned in the previous section, managers showed a strong commitment to supporting and developing the individuals in their teams. Leading the team was seen as an essential part of ensuring its success and as one participant observed 'you have to take it seriously because what you say and do has an impact'. In most of the colleges there were no other direct leaders for the staff to 'follow' other than their head of department, this supports the view of Briggs (2001) that for most middle managers leadership is localised within a department. In discussions, this team leadership although seen as a key part of the role did not result in the managers identifying themselves as leaders, still referring to it as a management or a combined role. Briggs (2005) study of middle managers in FE found that attitudes to and understanding of leadership within individual colleges shaped the managers' identification with leadership. I suggest that the attitudes of the middle managers may be influenced at a higher level by the sector as a whole which has

traditionally focused on top down leadership styles within a hierarchical structure. Whilst there is growing interest in collective, distributed and post-heroic approaches (Collinson and Collinson, 2009) this may not yet influence how leadership and management are conceptualised by individuals.

There was consensus over the barriers to acting in a leadership capacity. The pace and the amount of work coupled with the requirement to problem solve issues as they occur means it is difficult to focus on anything other than the present. Comments by participants illustrate this; 'all our time is occupied in our daily management role' and 'it's just management due to the sheer volume of work'. For most there was a frustration that this focus on day-to-day management activities stopped them from carrying out a leadership role, as in their view there was a lack of time to reflect on and think about leadership issues. This is supported by a recent report (FETL, 2016, p. 5) which concluded that 'leaders need time and resources to think, to understand the organisation they work in and its place in the wider world, and to develop new, robust and enterprising approaches that deliver the best outcomes for learners'. The situation with regard to lack of time to lead appears to be unchanged for almost three decades and is a recurring theme in the literature. In the late 1980s, Earley and Fletcher-Campbell (1993) found that middle managers in school were often preoccupied with routine administration and crisis management and had little time for strategic thinking. A study 22 years later found a similar situation with Iszatt-White *et al.* (2011) reporting that it is difficult for those occupying roles as middle managers to be visionary leaders if most of their time is spent fire-fighting. The comments made by participants infer that leadership activities (including time to reflect) continue to be side-lined due to the pressures of daily work.

5.6.3 The leader-manager role

In referring to the models of leadership described in Chapter 2, the leadership activity undertaken by middle managers is difficult to categorise as it does not easily align with a specific model. There appeared to be mixed leadership practice taking place referred to by Gronn (2011) as hybrid configurations of leadership. In all of the organisations there was a Principal or Chief Executive

supported by an SLT with layers of management below them. The middle managers were operating within a hierarchy with designated responsibility for departments so it could be argued in this situation that the leadership has been delegated rather than distributed within an organisational bureaucracy. Harris (2005a, p. 167) notes that 'distributed and hierarchical forms of leadership are not incompatible', they can co-exist, but it requires those in the SLT to actively promote and support it (Harris and Muijs, 2004). A review of research projects undertaken in the schools sector by Gronn (2010) found that despite leadership being distributed the principals still retained considerable power and authority, and he later suggested that it may be better to describe the leadership as configured (Gronn, 2016) rather than distributed, in these situations. Bush and Glover (2012) also found that the senior leaders or principals retained a central role but attributed this to the accountability framework within which schools (and colleges) operate. There do appear to be unresolved issues around power and accountability (Corrigan, 2013), whilst the managers in this study observed that 'the buck stopped with them' it was unclear how much authority they had as they were constrained not just by the organisation but by the need to comply with both sector and Government policies and initiatives.

In common with previous studies (Briggs, 2003b; Lambert, 2014; Lumby, 2001) the managers appeared reluctant to identify themselves as leaders preferring instead to see the role either as combined or one where management took precedence, focusing on the operational rather than strategic aspects. In describing their roles they indicated that 'the majority of time is spent on management' and the role is 'primarily one of management'. The actual work of leadership is difficult to define whereas management can more easily be broken down into a set of activities and this can cause individuals to 'default to management' in describing their roles and identity (Carroll and Levy, 2008). For most the line between leadership and management was blurred and with no distinct boundary and they were seen as linked or blended together. One participant described leadership and management as parallel, operating beside each other simultaneously. The description by Jameson and McNay (2007) of 'leader-managers' where the leadership and management are twin strands linked together within a dual role most closely describes the practice reported in this

study. According to Bolden (2004) these 'leader-managers' are capable of adopting the role in its most holistic form and depending on the situation one or other aspect may come to the fore, determined by context and needs. This is supported by the view expressed by one participant that they were 'both leader and manager, depending on the need of the moment'. In the same way that participants drew on aspects of both leadership and management, they also appeared to combine different approaches to leadership which aligns with the blended leadership described by (Collinson and Collinson, 2009). They understood the need for whole college approaches led by the SLT but also valued the opportunities they had to act autonomously. They acted both internally and externally liaising with a wide variety of stakeholders. They balanced their responsibilities as a follower of the SLT with those as a leader of their teams.

Reflecting both on the literature and the findings of the study it is evident that dualisms permeate all aspects of the middle manager role. To begin there are the issues around leadership and management and the need to draw on aspects of both. Then there are the contradictions between being in the position of both leader and follower within the organisation, required to draw two sides together. Tensions exist between the desire to act independently and make choices about their departments and the structures that limit this such as accountability and austerity; between having the opportunity to develop strategy against the need to implement policy imposed by Government. In negotiating these dualisms the managers are selecting and combining aspects of each in ways that make sense to them and give them meaning, enabling them to carry out their roles. Clearly more experienced managers could do this more easily as they had a wider repertoire of skills and experiences on which to draw. This demonstrates versatility in the managers' approaches and ability to adjust to changing contexts, situations and needs.

As area reviews create new larger bureaucratic organisations it will be impossible for one single leader to do all the work of leadership. Therefore multiple people will need to be involved, described by Diamond and Spillane (2016, p. 148) as leadership practice being 'stretched over' people within the organisation. However this leadership is stretched, configured or distributed it implies acceptance of everyone's leadership potential. MacBeath (2005) considers we

need to explore our understandings of what the term 'leadership' actually means. The managers were reluctant to identify themselves as leaders despite evidence that they were undertaking leadership practice. For this reason the leadership activities described by the participants could be considered as distributed leadership viewed as a behaviour rather than a role definition (Harris, 2004), enmeshed in social practice rather than in a clear cut definite figure (Wood, 2005). In considering the findings of this study it is useful to consider the work of Diamond and Spillane (2016) which takes leadership activity as the unit of analysis, where multiple people within the organisation are involved in leading and managing. In this way it is the practice of leadership which is distributed not the people of leadership. Research into leadership-as-practice has grown rapidly in the last decade and seeks to understand leadership practice wherever and however it appears. It moves the focus away from the heroic leader and towards a more democratic and inclusive way of looking at leadership (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016), emphasising the collective nature of the process. The focus is on interactions between individuals (Diamond and Spillane, 2016) conceptualising leadership as socially constructed (Denis, Langley and Rouleau, 2010). I selected social constructionism as the theory to inform my research study as I agreed with Spillane (2005) that leadership is not just about roles and positions but about the interactions between people as they work together collectively. A focus on leading practices adds to knowledge regarding the actual work of leadership (Carroll, Levy and Richmond, 2008), who is involved and how and where it is occurring within the organisation and uncouples leadership from position and the individual. I consider it could be a lens through which to provide a different view of the leadership practices of middle managers.

5.7 Views on progression

The participants were asked whether they were aspiring to senior management roles, as it was felt that this might influence their views on leadership and management. As set out in the findings, of the 12 participants, two were aspiring to senior management roles, four would consider it and six were definitely not looking to move to senior leadership. Those who did not want to progress to

senior posts were quick to stress that this was not due to a lack of ambition, rather that the continually evolving nature of the role provided adequate interest and challenge. Participants who had been in the sector and their role for a number of years commented that 'there are challenges, but it also quite exciting' and that 'you get to use your problem solving skills, it's just challenge all the time.' Many felt that a more senior role would involve more paperwork and a move even further away from the vocational subject focus. Often, the reason why they had taken the role was to engage young people in learning about land-based subjects whether it be animal care, agriculture or horticulture, they remained committed to the students and providing a high quality learning experience. Most participants felt their current role was 'a good fit for their skills set'. None were planning to leave the FE sector and only one participant had considered moving out of specialist land-based education into other areas.

In this study whilst the boundaries between senior and middle management were less sharply defined the gap between the two did appear to have widened with one participant commenting that it seemed like a big step and that 'if there was more of a tiered system then yes maybe I would like to progress'. Harper (2000) argues that although team-based non-hierarchical structures may be far more appropriate for the current environment they present fewer opportunities for promotion. Working in organisations with flatter structures can have an impact on career progression. Thomas and Dunkerley (1999) observed that where layers had been removed from the hierarchy the gaps between the levels became larger and for some middle managers the jump from one level to the next appeared too great with very few opportunities to bridge it. In addition the perception from several of the managers that there are fewer senior management posts is likely to be the reality considering the reduction of 61% in the number of specialist land-based colleges since 1993 referred to in Chapter one.

5.7.1 Continuing professional development

In reviewing the literature on career progression for middle managers in FE there was very little to draw on and succession planning within the sector appears to be an under researched area. Lambert (2011) believes that there is an impending

shortage of individuals wanting to become college Principals, he believes that creating a culture in which leadership skills can be developed may lead to a greater pool of candidates for leadership posts. However one of the challenges in a climate of ongoing funding cuts is that leadership development may not be considered a priority (ETF, 2016a). Despite this there does appear to be growing interest in leadership development programmes aimed at those in the FE sector. The development described by the participants in this study had in many cases been funded by their employer and had been useful in their current role but did not appear to focus on skills required for progression to senior roles.

If middle managers are not aiming to progress to senior leadership then it is important to see middle management as a career in its own right with associated training and development opportunities. The amount and type of training received by the managers in this study was extremely varied despite the small sample size. In all cases training had occurred after appointment rather than in preparation for it. Leadership and management training had been available to some of the interviewees, commonly in the form of a programme that ran over the course of a year. This was seen as beneficial, although maintaining momentum after the training had ended was identified as an issue in one case. Those new to the role described differing experiences, either of receiving a vast amount of training and information in the early stages of appointment which was difficult to process and contextualise, or the training coming too late leaving them to learn from and rely on the guidance of more experienced colleagues. Certainly in common with other studies in the sector (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2015) much of the training received by the participants was delivered in short sessions and focused on function and administration, how to complete specific management tasks. A number of individuals had undertaken Masters level study in Education (rather than in their subject specialism) to develop their knowledge and skills. Coaching or mentoring of the managers by others did not feature in the discussions, and it may be that this is underutilised. Although not directly asked, none of the respondents mentioned the training opportunities available through the ETF. An in-depth discussion on continuing professional development is outside the scope of this study, however it is worth noting that there is no

mandatory requirement within the sector for colleges to provide any form of training in management or leadership.

5.8 Summary

It would have been reasonable to expect that given the challenging situation with the sector, the views of the managers may have been negative and pessimistic. In fact the reverse was true. The managers interviewed for the study were incredibly positive about their role, their colleges and the sector.

It is clear that middle managers in land-based education appear to face similar challenges to those encountered by managers in other educational environments. However due to the specialist nature of the sector, the participants felt there was a need to understand and have experience of the subject areas because of the resources involved and the nature of the work. The large practical resources required to deliver the curriculum and the fact that these resources need attention 365 days per year makes a significant impact on the work of the middle managers. This further expands the role and although there were additional managers in place (e.g. farm manager, animal centre manager) the middle managers in the study were often responsible for these individuals and oversaw budgets and performance. There were two aspects to this situation. On one hand involvement with the resources enabled them to retain a strong connection with their vocational areas of interest. In some cases this was cited as a reason not to move into senior leadership roles, as it would take them too far away from the practical connections they had with both the resources and the students. It enabled them to use their specialist vocational knowledge and maintain their identity as a dual professional. However, on the other, it added further responsibility to an already large and complex role.

Cox et al. (2010) believe that leadership is role and context specific and the importance of context in understanding the middle managers' experiences in this study is essential. Further Education departments tend to have different ways of operating (Hargreaves, 1994) and I have argued that the context of land-based education has an impact on the practices of the managers. For example, I believe

that the strategy of management by wandering around, or walking about (MBWA) employed by the participants in the study is particularly suited to land-based departments where there are numerous and varied resources spread over a large geographical area. The only effective way regularly to meet staff face-to-face and build relationships is to go out to the areas and this activity was given high priority by the managers in this study. This approach does not appear to be prominent in the literature on management of further education departments and therefore may be a specific feature of land-based provision. All the managers worked at sites which were surrounded by acres of open countryside. There was anecdotal evidence that the environment had a positive impact on their views as they expressed how enjoyable it was to work in these locations. Many had been with the same employer for a number of years and did not plan to leave the sector. The final chapter considers how far the findings of the study and their subsequent analysis answer the research questions set.

CHAPTER 6 Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This study builds upon existing work on middle managers in the further education sector presented in the literature review. Whilst the study of middle managers is not new, it is an area that is thought to be under-researched and much of the literature focuses on middle managers more generally across a range of subject areas. Investigating their role specifically within land-based provision provides a new and different perspective. This is important because relatively little is known about specialist provision within the FE sector. It is intended that the findings of the study will inform and enhance understanding, providing new knowledge and information about the role as experienced in land-based provision.

This thesis therefore investigated the role of the middle manager in land-based provision within the FE sector with a focus on leadership and management. Whilst land-based makes up a small proportion of further education provision within England, it plays a significant role in preparing young people for careers in the land-based industries. These industries are becoming increasingly significant in terms of management of the physical environment, food production and security and responding to climate change. Land-based provision has been particularly affected by the trend towards mergers in recent decades and as the number of independent specialist colleges has declined. This research comprised managers from both merged and independent providers and the middle managers in the study had responsibility for curriculum areas rather than service provision. Middle managers were chosen in part because despite growing interest in leadership and management in the sector much of the research, particularly on leadership, is focused at senior management level. However, it is clear from the literature that building leadership capacity at all levels is considered to be a key factor in enabling colleges to meet the current and future challenges.

The research questions set were:

- How do middle managers of land-based provision view their role in the organisation?
- What impact do the changing priorities within the sector have on their role?
- How do they define and enact leadership and management in their role?
- What are their perceptions of progression to senior leadership and management roles within the sector?

This final chapter reflects on the degree to which the research questions have been answered by the findings of the study. This is followed by consideration of the areas that would benefit from further research. The chapter concludes with information regarding how the findings will be disseminated.

6.2 Addressing the research questions

The sample in this study comprised 12 middle managers from colleges across England; the themes identified were strong across the whole set of interviewees. Despite the current challenges within the sector and consequent impact of these on the middle managers, the overall impression was that they retained a strong moral purpose and focus on the learner. Experienced managers appeared to take a pragmatic approach to the continuing 'policy churn' (Norris and Adam, 2017) although many were frustrated by the focus on data and quantitative performance measures. Smith and O'Leary (2013) believe that the ongoing uncertainty in the sector means employees are reluctant to speak negatively about their experiences; however I believe the participants in this study presented a balanced view of their role including both positive and negative aspects. They demonstrated a strong vocational calling and commitment to their subject areas, balancing the requirements of the college courses with the professional standards of the occupations the students hoped to enter. This strength of connection was also evident through their involvement with the resources required to deliver their subject areas. Whether this is specific to land-based education is difficult to ascertain as the majority of studies of middle managers

have been conducted in general FE colleges, taking in a range of subjects rather than focusing on a specific vocational area.

6.2.1 How do middle managers of land-based provision view their role in the organisation?

The first research question explored how the middle managers view their role within the organisation. It was noted in reviewing the literature that the role of the middle manager has been gradually moving away from one focused on pedagogy to purely managerial aspects, and the findings from this study imply that this trend or progression continues. It was evident from participants' responses that managerialism, including a strong focus on data and auditing, permeated their roles. However, despite the culture of managerialism and performativity, their strength of commitment to the learners helped them keep perspective and cope with the bureaucratic demands (Coffield et al., 2008). Much of the literature focuses on the erosion of autonomy due to managerialism and performativity (Gleeson, Davies and Wheeler, 2005; Simmons and Thompson, 2008) yet the managers in this study felt they had retained a level of autonomy in their role and had an impact on both the strategy for their area and the wider college. There was evidence that they concentrated their efforts on areas where they could make a difference particularly in regard to the curriculum and learners. Managers who were new to the sector appeared to accept managerialism as normal and this was evident in their language, freely using terms such as key performance indicators, strategic plans and target setting. It is interesting to reflect on the differences in responses between less experienced managers or those new to the sector with those who have been in the sector for an extended period. Those who had experience of the sector both pre and post incorporation could clearly articulate the impact that the latter had had on their practices. It is most likely that over time as new managers join the sector, new public management becomes normalised (Smith and O'Leary, 2013) as these individuals have not experienced the sector in any other form.

The middle manager's role is notoriously difficult to define; however, there were considerable similarities in the roles as described by the managers in this study despite differences in their job titles. This could be explained by the fact that they were all working within the same sector and subject areas. However the inclusion of five different colleges from across the country which included both specialist and merged providers may have led to greater differences. The core activities undertaken by the managers included management of the curriculum in its broadest sense from timetabling though to resource and staff management. The importance of understanding and monitoring data and using this information to inform decision making permeated all aspects of the role. These activities were common to all managers in the study and are similar to those described in the literature which suggests that there is some agreement about the main purpose of the role. The prevailing view expressed was that its main function was to make sure that their department ran smoothly, expressed by one participant as 'making sure it all works' and there are links here with the role of implementer as described by (Briggs, 2005). However, it is the 'all' that causes the issues, in many respects the roles were extremely diverse resulting in a constant need to juggle priorities. College restructures have led to leaner senior management teams and in some cases a blurring of the lines between senior and middle management responsibilities. In addition both senior and middle managers appear unwilling to delegate responsibilities to lecturers who are focused on the teaching and delivery of the courses. This leads to a lack of role clarity not because the managers do not understand the main purpose of the role but because the boundaries of are difficult to define as described by (Page, 2011b). There are two sides to this, on one hand expansion of responsibilities means roles have become more varied which appears to have a positive impact on retention for managers who enjoy new challenges. On the other hand, it can lead to role overload particularly to those new in post with less experience. Both role clarity and role overload have been reported in previous studies of middle managers within FE, along with a lack of time to undertake the role (Earley and Fletcher-Campbell, 1993). It is clear from the findings of this study that it continues to be an issue for those in the middle of an organisation. That is not to say that the managers in this study felt unsupported. In general they were extremely positive about the support they received, the middle manager role did in common with the

literature appear to be the one 'around which the work of the college articulates' (Briggs, 2005, p. 48) and this was acknowledged by senior management teams. However, this does raise an important question: why if the role is widely acknowledged as being essential, do the well documented issues around role clarity and overload persist?

These enduring issues will not be easily resolved but I believe are worthy of attention to ensure that middle managers who have been acknowledged as essential to the success of the organisation do not spend their time fire-fighting. To address these issues requires the support from senior leaders within individual colleges. One approach to improve role clarity and reduce overload would be redefining the role so that the boundaries are clear. This could involve increasing the number of first tier or lower middle managers who are able to take on some of the responsibilities. Conducting a detailed analysis of how the middle managers' time is allocated during the day would be useful in exploring whether there are aspects of the role which could be delegated to administrators or other support staff. This redistribution of responsibilities should allow managers time to reflect on and address the current challenges facing organisations and develop their leadership capacity. A report into leadership in the sector identified that time for thinking is generally undervalued but should be seen as a necessity (FETL, 2016). As role expansion now encompasses aspects which were previously the remit of senior leaders, this time to think strategically about current and future issues becomes more important.

6.2.2 What impact do the changing priorities within the sector have on the middle manager's role?

The environment in which they are operating has a significant impact on the work of the middle managers. There was a need as expressed by one participant to be 'thinking all the time about change' and this is a good summary for the situation the managers found themselves in. Most recognised and acknowledged this situation as normal and whilst they were accustomed to it they did not believe that it had a positive impact on the sector. Constant challenges originated from a

range of sources including the Government, awarding organisations and funding bodies. There was also the pressure of need 'to do more for less' as a result of the current austerity measures and the ongoing area reviews which are changing the landscape of the sector. The findings provided evidence of on-going restructuring within colleges as a result of these pressures. A recent report claims that 'instability in the sector has created a complex and changeable landscape' (Norris and Adam, 2017, p. 5), coping with this constant change is a reality for those working in the sector (City&Guilds, 2014). The turbulence within the sector results in changes within organisations as they restructure and adapt to meet new requirements, described by Smith and O'Leary (2013) as a process of continual reinvention. For all the managers a key part of the role was being able to identify and respond to these continually shifting priorities in order to secure the success of their department and the college as a whole.

It is evident from the findings of this study that the role of the middle manager is strongly influenced by the situation within the wider FE sector. Interest in the issues facing the sector appears to be gaining momentum. A recent report by the Institute for Government reflecting on why Britain is so prone to policy reinvention, and what can be done about it, uses the FE sector to illustrate its argument (Norris and Adam, 2017). The report includes a number of suggestions to promote long term strategic planning and stability but as yet these are in their infancy. A review of the Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2012 simplification plan which aimed to reduce complexity and the administrative burden resulting from this found that although some progress had been made a more serious effort was needed before significant impact would be seen (NAO, 2014). Tackling these issues would reduce the need for the managers to be 'thinking all the time about change' and produce a more stable environment for them to work within. There could be greater focus on long term goals rather than the 'reactionary and short-termist' approach described by Smith and O'Leary (2013, p. 251). Reducing both the rate of change and the administrative burden would hopefully result in less need to manage processes and more time to develop leadership capacity.

6.2.3 How do the middle managers define and enact leadership and management in their role?

Research question three was concerned with the managers' views on leadership and management in relation to their role. When articulating the differences between the two, their views were very similar with leadership being seen as concerned with the organisation's future strategic direction, and management more to do with functional and operational issues. Yukl and Lepsinger (2005) believe the 'managing versus leading' controversy continues because the narrow definitions given to the roles makes it hard to understand how they can be integrated, suggesting there is a need to build better bridges between the leadership and management literature. Certainly it was evident from the literature that there are ongoing debates about how leadership and management are similar to or differ from each other. Conceptualising and defining leadership and management have always been difficult, yet both are important (Kotterman, 2006). It would appear through reading the literature that the term leader is given greater status and value. However management is equally important in enabling an organisation to achieve its objectives. As reported in the literature (Briggs, 2003b; Lambert, 2014; Lumby, 2001) the managers were more likely to self-identify as a manager rather than a leader. However their responses indicated they were using both leadership and management skills in carrying out their roles within the organisation and were able to move between the two depending on the situation or need at the time demonstrating flexibility in their approach. There appeared to be discord between how the managers described the role, with its emphasis on management, and on how they thought others viewed it, with a focus on leadership. This suggests some confusion on the exact nature of the role and could link to the issue of poorly defined boundaries. Most felt the role combined aspects of both leadership and management but that management took priority to ensure the department ran smoothly. This ability to draw on elements of each (Field and Holden, 2013) depending on the demands of the situation (Northouse, 2004) could classify them as 'leader-managers' (Bolden, 2004; Jameson and McNay, 2007). Whilst blended leadership (Collinson and Collinson, 2009) is a good fit when describing models of leadership currently employed in the sector, I suggest that viewing leadership as practice would

provide an alternative model to use in considering the actions of the middle managers in the study.

Currently there is increased interest in leadership in part due to concerns that there is not enough leadership capacity within the sector to enable the improvement needed (Ofsted, 2016) and tackle the challenges which according to Hill, James and Forrest (2016, p. 79) are 'major in their scale, occurring together, and add to and exacerbate each other'. This coupled with the drive for colleges to merge to become larger and more efficient or to join together to form groups of colleges points to the importance of distributed forms of leadership (Jupp, 2015). I agree with MacBeath (2005) that there is a need to consider what the term leadership actually means and which recognises the importance of it being collective and spread throughout an organisation (Godfrey, 2015). Viewing leadership as activity (Diamond and Spillane, 2016) rather than as located within an individual, provides another way to analyse the practices of the middle managers. This approach considers leadership to be enmeshed in social practice (Wood, 2005) and emphasises the collective nature of the process. Viewed in this way, the work of leadership takes place through patterns of action and interaction (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016). It uncouples leadership from position and individual (Carroll, Levy and Richmond, 2008) and could help to deepen understanding of their contribution to leadership within the wider organisation providing a more holistic view of the work undertaken within this complex leader-manager role.

6.2.4 What are the middle managers perceptions of progression to senior leadership and management roles within the sector?

The final research question was concerned with how the managers perceived progression to senior leadership roles. The responses showed that obtaining promotion to senior leadership positions was not a high priority for the majority of the managers, with only two of the 12 participants clearly focused on moving into a senior leadership role. Maintaining a connection with the vocational area and the students as well as finding their current role challenging and interesting were cited as reasons for remaining in the current role. This indicates that middle

management is a destination and a career in its own right. Despite this there appears to be a lack of consistency in the amount and type of training and development offered to middle managers. Whilst issues around training and development formed a small part of this study the findings demonstrated considerable variation in the opportunities available to middle managers. In common with findings from the literature much of the training undertaken focused on technical and process issues (Evans, 2007; Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2015). However, where leadership training had been offered it was reported as being beneficial. From analysis of the findings it would appear that investment into middle management through structured training and development programmes may be of benefit. This should occur at all stages; in preparation for the position, in the early stages, to maintain momentum and focus and where appropriate to support development to senior leadership. In the long term, establishing a career structure could help individuals identify how to advance their careers in the sector. The perception identified in this study, that there are less senior positions to apply for within land-based provision, is likely to be a reality due the decreasing number of specialist colleges and the move towards leaner SLTs. There is very little in the published literature about either succession planning or the aspirations of middle managers within the FE sector so it is difficult to make comparisons.

6.3 Areas for further research

The study comprised five colleges and 12 interviews. Issues with gaining access meant it was not possible to widen the current study to include other participants' views e.g. lower middle managers (often called course managers) and senior managers within each college. This would have given a wider perspective on the role and on leadership and management aspects. The views analysed are therefore purely those of the middle managers. It also presents a snapshot in time, the summer of 2016 and as such has relatively narrow focus. A longitudinal study may be useful in monitoring the experiences in particular of new managers as they develop in the role. There are very few studies on land-based education, therefore it was not possible to make direct comparisons of the findings.

There are a number of areas arising from this study that would benefit from further study. Firstly, there is a need to involve senior leaders to gain insight into their understanding of the role of middle managers and views on leadership. This is important as within the traditional hierarchical structure they are directing the work of the managers and also hold the power and authority. Exploring their understanding and interpretation of leadership would help to unpick the issues concerning delegation and distribution evident in the literature. This work could be expanded to consider models of leadership more generally and include exploration of leadership as practice. Secondly, there is a need to continue to explore and examine the role in all FE settings particularly as the landscape of FE changes following area review. This could include other specialist provision to allow comparisons to be made. As the role is considered to be pivotal, around which the work of the college happens, a greater understanding of how the role is enacted would be beneficial. Lastly, there appears to be a lack of current research on progression to senior leadership and succession planning within the sector. This was only a marginal part of this study but worthy of further research to determine how current middle managers aspiring to senior leadership posts can best be supported to achieve these. I have suggested that training and development programmes aimed specifically at middle managers in FE may be of benefit; however more research needs to be done to identify how this could be structured and delivered to meet the needs of the managers.

6.4 Dissemination of findings

Contribution to the knowledge base will be made through dissemination of the findings from the study through publishing articles in peer reviewed journals. I also intend to present at conferences which will provide opportunities to participate in discussion and exchange views and ideas on the findings of the study. Collaboration with other individuals who are researching middle managers will enable comparisons to be drawn between land-based and the wider FE sector. Completing the EdD has enabled me to join the wider academic community and I look forward to participating in further research on leadership and management.

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Appendix 1 Interview questions for middle managers – 1st draft

Background and Structure of Organisation

1. Could you describe the structure of the organisation?
2. Tell me about your department or area.
3. How long have you worked as a 'middle manager'?
4. What led you to this position?

Middle Manager Role

5. What does the role involve?
6. How do you see your role?
7. Thinking about the role would you describe yourself as a manager or a leader (or both?) in your current role? Why?
8. How would you describe the difference between leadership and management?
9. What do you think the organisation expects of you in your current role?
10. Do you feel the organisation considers the role as that of a manager or a leader?

Preparation for Role

11. What training have you received for your current role?
12. Did it focus on management or leadership aspects?
13. Did it make a difference to how you see your current role?

Challenges

14. What are the challenges for middle managers, now and in the future?
15. Are there challenges specific to the land-based sector?

Strategic Influence

16. Are you involved with developing the strategy for the department / the organisation?
17. What influence / involvement do you have on the overall strategy / policy?
18. Is this an area you would like greater involvement with?

Aspirations

19. Are you aspiring to senior leadership positions in the future?
20. What training or development would you like to participate in?
21. What qualities do you think leaders of the future will need to meet the demands of the sector?

Appendix 2 Interview questions for middle managers – 2nd draft

Background

1. Could you describe the structure of the organisation?
 - a. *Hierarchy or flat structure?*
 - b. *Layers of management?*
2. Tell me about your department or area.
 - a. *Size and number of subjects*
 - b. *Number of staff*
 - c. *Practical resource*
 - d. *Cross college or single area*
3. How long have you worked as a 'middle manager'?
4. What led you to this position?
 - a. *Vocational background*
 - b. *Transition from teacher to manger*
 - c. *Promoted within organisation or from outside*
 - d. *Issues around dual / triple professionalism*

Context

5. How aware are you of the Government's current policy initiatives in regard to the FE sector?
 - a. *Explore area reviews, funding, apprenticeships, maths and English provision*
6. Tell me about your involvement in developing the strategy for the department / the organisation in response to these initiatives.
 - a. *Are they involved in creating strategy or implementing strategy given to them*
7. Have these had an impact on your role as a middle manager?
 - a. *Restructuring, financial constraints, redefining priorities, increased or changed workload*

Role

8. What does your role involve?
 - a. *Teaching?*
 - b. *Remit and responsibilities?*
 - c. *Staff management?*
 - d. *Quality monitoring?*
9. How do you see your role?
10. How do others see the role (both senior managers and those staff whom you manage)?
 - a. *Explore dual role as leader and follower*
11. What training or development have you had in relation to your role?
 - a. *Did it focus on people or process?*
 - b. *Did it introduce new ideas, concepts and strategies?*

Appendix 3 Reflections on pilot interview

As I know the interviewee well this may have had an impact on how they answered the questions, as there is a shared understanding about our position and role in the organisation. Therefore, the first three questions were redundant in this context and I began at question 4 - what led you to this position? The view was put forward that neither teacher training nor vocational background led to preparation for a middle management role. This required an entirely new set of skills. This question and the prompts around dual and triple professionalism led to an in depth response from the interviewee, raising a number of interesting points about preparation for the role which I had planned to cover in Question 11. As a result, moving on to questions about context then felt rather disjointed. The questions about context elicited the most emotional response, with reference to personal and professional values and lack of autonomy felt by the interviewee.

Questions 8 and 9 focussed on the role of the middle manager, there was some conflict here between expectations and actualities and the answers to these questions blended together. When considering how others see the role (senior managers and lecturers) for question 10, the interviewee felt that this had changed over time and described a number of turning points or critical events that had influenced this. It was also interesting that they considered that feedback from those above and below could be useful in developing as a manager but how such feedback was limited.

Question 11 on training and development again elicited another detailed response. This covered training prior to the role, training in the first year in post and then subsequent training needs. The interviewee felt that it wasn't until you were in post that you became aware of your inabilities and knew what training you needed. They discussed the fact that they would have liked a coach or mentor to help them develop in the role and this response led me to include this as a prompt for the main interviews, as it wasn't an area I had considered before.

The final questions about the differences between leadership and management encouraged the interviewee to think about different aspects of their role and consider whether they were leading or managing. They felt there was a fuzzy

line between the two and that although most of the work was operational and involved problem solving they still need to think strategically.

The final question asks if the interviewee has anything they would like to add and this brought up two suggestions. Firstly, that I hadn't asked a question about whether they were aspiring to a senior leadership post. The participant felt that this had a big impact on construction of identity and willingness to participate in training opportunities. They suggested that those happy to stay as middle managers may be less interested in developing leadership skills. In earlier drafts I had included a question on this topic as it addressed one of my research questions but I had removed it in an attempt to narrow the focus of the interviews. As a result of this insight, I included it again as I felt that the points raised were valid and would increase my understanding of the interviewees aspirations. Secondly they felt it would be interesting to talk about change management. The sector is currently feeling the impact of austerity and alongside a number of policy initiatives this has led to the need for change and how to prepare your staff for change. Whilst this may come up again in interviews it is an area I am not going to focus on as change management is a topic in itself and outside of the focus of this research.

Appendix 4 Interview questions for middle managers – final

Background

1. Could you describe the structure of the organisation?
 - a. *Hierarchy or flat structure?*
 - b. *Layers of management?*
2. Tell me about your department or area.
 - a. *Size and number of subjects*
 - b. *Number of staff*
 - c. *Practical resource*
 - d. *Cross college or single area*
3. How long have you worked as a 'middle manager'?
4. What led you to this position?
 - a. *Vocational background*
 - b. *Transition from teacher to manger*
 - c. *Promoted within organisation or from outside*
 - d. *Issues around dual / triple professionalism*

Context

5. How aware are you of the Government's current policy initiatives in regard to the FE sector?
 - a. *Explore area reviews, funding, apprenticeships, maths and English provision*
6. Tell me about your involvement in developing the strategy for the department / the organisation in response to these initiatives.
 - a. *Are they involved in creating strategy or implementing strategy given to them*
7. Have these strategies had an impact on your role as a middle manager?
 - a. *Restructuring, financial constraints, redefining priorities, increased or changed workload*

Role

8. What does your role involve?
 - a. *Teaching?*
 - b. *Remit and responsibilities?*
 - c. *Staff management?*
 - d. *Quality monitoring?*
 - e. *Teaching and Learning?*
9. How do you see your role?
10. How do others see the role (both senior managers and those staff whom you manage)?
 - a. *Explore dual role as leader and follower*
11. What training or development have you had in relation to your role?
 - a. *Formal induction process?*

- b. Did it focus on people or process?*
 - c. Coaching or mentoring?*
 - d. Did it introduce new ideas, concepts and strategies?*
 - e. Was it concerned with leadership or management?*
 - f. Has it had an impact on your role?*
12. What do you see as the difference between management and leadership?
- a. Are the lines clearly defined or blurred?*
13. Thinking about the role would you describe yourself as a manager or a leader (or both?) in your current role? Why? Can you give examples (vignettes)? Is it possible to lead from the middle?
14. Are you aiming to progress into a senior leadership role in the future?
15. Do you have anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 5 Gaining access

Initial Contact made at conference to gate keepers (college Principals)

Dear....

It was good to meet you at the recent conference and I thank you for your interest in my research. As discussed, I am undertaking research concerning the role of middle managers within land-based further education as part of a Doctorate in Education at Institute of Education, UCL.

I have selected middle managers as the focus as many believe that that they play a strategically important role in managing, leading and implementing organisational change and improvement. Despite a growing interest in leadership in the sector, the research in this area appears to be relatively sparse and this is particularly true for land-based education.

I aim to investigate the experiences of those in the middle and how they construct their identity as managers and /or leaders. This will be set in the context of the changes currently taking place within the FE sector and the impact these may have on the middle manager role.

Taking part will involve providing:

- Email addresses for academic middle managers responsible for land-based areas of provision
- A sample job description for academic middle managers and a copy of the college's organisational structure.

It would also be helpful if you could indicate possible dates when I could visit your college (or those I should avoid) to conduct interviews between now and the end of July 2016.

Middle managers will then be contacted by email informing them of the purpose of the research and if they agree to take part I will arrange to visit the college to meet with them. Responses from a range of participants and colleges will be analysed with the aim of identifying themes across the sector and contribute to the relatively small body of empirical evidence in this area. I plan to disseminate the findings of the research through completion of an EdD thesis, through contact with organisations relevant to the FE sector and by publishing a research article in an appropriate journal.

You will be provided with a summary report of the findings of the research and the key themes emerging.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Catherine Lloyd

Appendix 6 Contact with participants

Initial Contact – Participant

Dear

I am contacting you to enquire whether you would be willing to take part in research concerning the role of middle managers within land-based further education. This research is part of a Doctorate in Education at Institute of Education, London and influenced by the fact that I work as a middle manager in the land-based sector.

Taking part will involve participating in a face to face interview where you will be asked questions concerning the management and leadership aspects of your role and whether the role has been influenced by the current challenges within the FE sector. A list of questions will be provided prior to the interview so you are clear of the number and type of questions you will be asked.

The interview will last approximately 50-60 minutes and will be conducted at a time and location convenient to you on the college premises *add dates in here*. All interviews will be recorded and fully transcribed and you will be asked to check the notes taken during the interview to ensure accuracy.

The data will be presented anonymously (both in terms of organisation and participants, where pseudonyms will be used) and included in a research study which I am carrying out for my own academic purposes. I plan to disseminate the findings of the research through publishing a research article in an appropriate journal.

If you choose to be part of the study you may withdraw from the process at any time up until completion of the thesis report and publication of any research articles.

An information sheet containing details about the research is attached, please contact me if you have any queries about this research. I hope that you will be willing to participate. If you would like to take part please contact me on the email below:

Yours sincerely

Catherine Lloyd

Information Sheet

The purpose of the research

The research is concerned with the role of middle managers within Further Education as despite a growing interest in leadership in the sector, the research in this area appears to be relatively sparse and this is particularly true for land-based education.

I have selected middle managers as a focus as many believe that they play a strategically important role in managing, leading and implementing organisational change and improvement. I aim to investigate the experiences of those in the middle and how they construct their identity as managers or leaders. This will be set in the context of the changes currently taking place within the FE sector and the impact these may have on the middle manager role.

It is hoped that this research will contribute to the literature on middle management in further education and provide insight specifically into the land-based sector.

Taking Part

You have been contacted to participate as it is felt that your views could contribute to and inform the research. Participation in the project is completely voluntary. You will be asked to sign a consent form but you are free to withdraw at any time during the data collection phase.

If you agree to take part you will be invited to attend an interview at a time and location convenient to yourself on your college premises. The interviews will last for approximately 50 minutes and cover issues around management and leadership for those 'in the middle' of further education colleges. A full list of questions will be provided prior to the interview. Interviews will be recorded and fully transcribed. You will be sent a copy of the notes taken during the interview for you to agree content. After the research is complete interview recordings will be deleted.

If you agree to participate you will need to give up your time to participate and be willing to discuss your views with the interviewer. No rewards or expenses are available for taking part.

Confidentiality

All information will be kept confidential. Once the interviews have taken place all data will be anonymised. Colleges and participants will be given pseudonyms which will enable me to distinguish them but will not reveal their actual identity.

The results

The results from all participants will be analysed with the aim of identifying any common themes across the sector. Your words may be quoted within the research but a pseudonym will be used so that you cannot be identified.

I plan to disseminate the findings of the research through completion of an EdD thesis, through contact with organisations relevant to the FE sector and by publishing a research article in an appropriate journal.

Contact for further information

Further information can be obtained from the researcher.

Appendix 7 Consent form

Statement of consent for research into middle managers in land-based further education.

Please confirm that:

1. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research.
2. You have read the information sheet and understand the purpose of the research.
3. You understand that interviews will be recorded and fully transcribed.
4. You understand that you will be able to agree the accuracy of the notes taken during the interview.
5. You understand that participation in this research is voluntary and that you can withdraw from this research at any time during the data collection period (before 30/09/16).
6. Although your words may be quoted, your name and that of your institution will be anonymised in the thesis and any future publications, reports, articles etc.... through the use of pseudonyms.
7. You understand that personal details such as email addresses will not be revealed.

I consent to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of participant: _____

Signature of researcher: _____