‘Your Flexible Friends’: sessional lecturers in the UK further education sector, commitment, quality and service delivery

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ABSTRACT This research examines the utilisation of part-time lecturers in the further education (FE) sector and considers the impact that has on the quality of service delivery. The research has used qualitative and quantitative methods in a longitudinal study of a sample of 42 sessional lecturers drawn from colleges within the East Midlands. The article explores changes within the sector providing a literature review on the changing nature of the FE sector. The article then considers the experience and reality of those employed as sessional lecturers, highlighting the benefits of a flexible workforce to the organisation, but also considering some of the main issues surrounding its utilisation. The article concludes with reflections on the implications for college management of present trends in flexible staffing.

Introduction and Rationale

This article describes research undertaken in East Midlands further education (FE) colleges into the recruitment and utilisation of part-time lecturers and considers the impact of contemporary staffing strategies on the quality of service delivery. Throughout the 1990s the sector saw the impact of, on the one hand, widening participation and, on the other, the need to face commercial realities and greater accountability. The sector is at the forefront of the government’s agenda for raising educational attainment and employability, but can colleges deliver rising targets and expectations of service quality in the light of changes in staffing and strategy? It is suggested that in terms of utilisation the ‘flexible workforce’ in UK FE has now become the ‘core’, but without corresponding changes in recruitment, conditions or staff development; the consequence of this may potentially undermine the college’s service delivery. Do sessional staff offer comparable levels of learning support to FE’s already diverse client base and do they in turn receive the levels of institutional support they require? The research has used quantitative and qualitative research methods based on a sample of 42 sessional lecturers drawn from a range of East Midlands colleges.

The following sections investigate, firstly: the historical context of organisational
change in FE, the changing nature of work and employment, models of flexible employment from the human resource management (HRM) literature and their influence, management styles and strategies in FE in the 1990s and the perceived consequences of these styles and strategies on sessional staff in FE at the present time. Then, following a consideration of methodological issues, alternative strategies will be discussed, including questionnaire surveys, key informant interviews and focus groups, all of which have been used in this study. Data from the field research will be analysed and evaluated and key themes and issues will be identified. Finally, critical issues for the management of staff in FE will be considered, as will directions for future research.

**Literature Review**

The FE sector prior to 1990 was very different to that found today. The writer’s personal experience in pre-incorporation FE colleges in Leicestershire, supplemented by data from long service staff in key informant interviews, confirmed in part the views suggested by Frain (1993) in his case study of Liverpool City College, where he reported 1983 Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI) findings in relation to FE provision in Liverpool, which included in its observations and recommendations generous academic staffing levels and low staff:student ratios (SSRs) in some areas and the under-utilisation of accommodation. Frain also reported 1984 Liverpool District Audit findings, that included the under-utilisation of teaching staff, widespread use of ‘overtime’ payments even if the lecturer was not fully ‘up to hours’, duplication of courses between colleges, a reluctance to make surplus lecturers redundant, high levels of remission, variability in the teaching week and weaknesses in the provision of management information; in fact, as Frain suggested, matters that went ‘beyond a call for good housekeeping’. This is not to denigrate much of the good work done in colleges: they clearly met local demands and genuinely offered the ‘second chance’ to many students that many regarded as their role. Colleges were also very pleasant places to work: staff enjoyed relatively good conditions of service and contact hours compared with, say, the schools sector, but also relatively declining levels of pay compared with comparable occupational groups in industry.

The inefficiencies had not gone unnoticed, however. At the national level, an Audit Commission report *Obtaining Better Value from Further Education* (Audit Commission, 1985) pointed to ‘value improvement opportunities worth over £300,000 per college per year’. These included attention to SSRs, cost recovery, utilisation of physical resources and, especially, in staffing efficiencies, which were said to be (p. 2):

- not conducive to value for money. The reduction in class contact as seniority increases, the lack of minimum class contact hours, teaching years of 33 weeks or less, and timetabling arrangements which permit lecturers to claim overtime payments even though they have not met their contractual hours for the year as a whole, are all aspects of the present arrangements requiring attention.

To make matters worse, as a Department of Education and Science (1987) report
identified, student numbers were expected to decline in the 1990s due to a demographic downturn and concluded that:

Marginal improvements in the efficiency of a service costing the public more than £1 billion would release considerable resources.

The report examined a range of factors, including the potential for tightening SSRs, differences between teaching and actual contact hours and the utilisation of accommodation. It recommended local control of budgets and the introduction of a range of new efficiency-based performance indicators. It concluded that course enrolments and class sizes should be increased and that this was ‘not likely to have an adverse effect of student quality’.

The subsequent 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) was to have a dramatic impact on FE, which was well summarised from a range of Further Education Unit (FEU) papers by Fay (1989), who identified as key change factors a fall in the number of 16–19-year-olds of between 6.5 and 12.5% between 1986 and 1994, a need to reduce lecturer full time equivalents (FTEs) by 18%, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) rationalisation of vocational education and training (VET), changes to college governance and the delegation of college budgets to governors. By 1993 colleges had left local authority control to become corporate bodies under independent boards of governors, whose responsibilities included the management of assets and the employment of staff. The majority of funding came by this time from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), who also took over the quality inspection responsibilities previously held by HMI, making them the single most powerful stakeholder in colleges, not least because they could withhold funding if provision was found to be unsatisfactory. Their funding strategies (e.g. clawing back funding if students dropped out) led to pressures for retention of unsatisfactory students and even some rather strange management practices to encourage retention [Lucas (1998) described one college’s practice of giving Argos ‘premier points’ as a device to keep students at college] but conflicted with pressures to recruit high intake numbers. This later manifested itself in a range of strategies associated with the new buzz phrase of ‘widening participation’ (FEFC, 1996; Kennedy, 1997). Their funding changes produced an increase in student numbers of 25% with a similar reduction in unit funding per student. Changes to lecturers contracts followed in 1994, which had the effect of increasing class contact up to more than 800 hours per year, which produced a long but ultimately ineffective dispute with the union, NATFHE.

Further financial stringencies came in 1997 with the capping of funding for student growth, leaving most colleges with declining funding levels, to the extent that funding per student fell by 1999 to less than 70% of the 1990 figure. Clearly staffing costs had to be reduced and the FEFC (1996, p. 6) noted that ‘to reduce costs colleges increasingly rely on part-time staff’. Management styles and management strategies had certainly changed from the often benevolent/paternalistic practices of the 1970s and 1980s. Randle and Brady (1997) described the ‘new managerialism’ of 1990s FE, although this was actually seen to be endemic throughout the public sector at the time, for example:
the creation of a flexible workforce, using flexible/individualised contracts, appraisal systems and performance related pay.

Concurrent changes in businesses human resource theory and practices had informed the changing shape of the FE workforce. Significantly, at the same time the widespread redundancies following a period of heavy use of early retirement in the sector changed the balance of the core–periphery workforce. Various models of ‘workforce flexibility’ mapped changes in organisational practice, the most widely quoted being those of Atkinson (1985), whose core–periphery model was at once widely criticised and widely quoted, but nonetheless one could see many features tracking through into FE management practices at the time, including part-time working, job sharing and delayed recruitment. Edwards (1993) identified, for example, the trend towards ‘multi-skilling the flexible workforce’, which supports the author’s own experience of the expectation that one could teach a wider range of subjects in FE than had hitherto been the case, although Edwards was referring to, for example, academic staff undertaking clerical roles or counselling and guidance. Handy’s (1989) model of the ‘shamrock organisation’ also has strong links to FE practice: the ‘professional core’ being those who are the glue that binds the organisation together, but being relatively expensive are also prone to restructuring; the ‘contractual fringe’ being those people who offer specialist services and who are bought in on an ad hoc basis, such as for a short specialist course (many ‘consultants’ engage with the FE sector in this capacity; while the ‘flexible labour force’ provides for changing labour requirements). What will be debated at a later stage of this paper is that the utilisation of part-time lecturers (PTLs) in FE had by this time moved on to such an extent that it was no longer meeting short-term requirements, and that the periphery had become the core, in that PTLs had become the mainstay of much teaching provision. An appealing feature of Handy’s model in the FE context is the inclusion of the ‘fourth leaf’: customers, as part of the organisation. Given the movement in the language of education from ‘teaching to learning’, could this be seen as engaging the ‘learners’ (or customers) even more in organisational processes?

With the benefit of historical hindsight one can now see how the various pressures of efficiency gains, early retirement of an ageing ‘core’, widespread redundancy, non-replacement of full-time staff, curricular changes, changes in resource utilisation, contracts and timetabling all contrived to significantly alter the core–periphery balance numerically in FE. Many of these had been in what Wild (1994) had called the ‘bastions of male technical expertise’ (which had admittedly been inefficient and heavily subsidised), but without necessarily corresponding increases in women’s access to senior management roles. Some staff also left voluntarily, in response to workload intensification and lowering pay levels relative to school teaching, as well as increased pressures on management leading to a disincentive to pursue promotion opportunities (Wild, 1994) and, indeed, according to the author’s observations, a not uncommon practice of ‘stepping down’ from positions of responsibility.

Randle and Brady (1997) point to a further problematic element of the shamrock model in the FE context: lecturers would traditionally have regarded themselves as ‘professionals’ and in theory, if not in practice, would have traditionally met many
of the criteria for definition as professionals: of relative autonomy for example. However Randle and Brady also point out that they could not limit entry as could, for example, medicine or the law and that:

casualisation is now institutionalised in the form of Education Lecturing Services (ELS), a private agency set up to avoid colleges having to concede improved employment rights and redundancy payments to part-time lecturers.

The same authors summarised the conflicting professional and managerial paradigms in FE, shown here as Appendix 1. Control was also increased and autonomy diminished, according to Randle and Brady, by the tight prescription of new qualification frameworks such as GNVQs. They concluded that academic labour in FE was being ‘proletarianised’ and ‘deprofessionalised’ as a deliberate outcome of government strategy, but suggested that this had led to problems in the quality of service delivery. These concerns were reflected in the findings of Barnes and O’Hara (1999), albeit in a higher education context (with a sample of just 15 staff), whose concerns included: the impact of regular renewal and replacement of staff due to contract expiry upsetting team continuity, short-termism deterring from investment in longer term projects, problems in planning delivery in the longer term and a more transactional approach to the employment relationship. The same authors also highlighted inappropriate systems and procedures relating to matters as simple as library membership, access to e-mail or access to photocopying. Career development, often facilitated through engagement with prestigious projects, was also denied short-term or temporary staff.

Ollin (1996) also referred to an element of Atkinson’s model in reference to de-skilling through the removal of empowered decision making and suggested that:

Some colleges appear to be prioritising cost factors by specifically recruiting unqualified and inexperienced staff on the first points of the lecturing scale and paying part-time staff on the lowest rates.

Concerns about pay were also expressed by NATFHE (1999), who suggested that since 1993 lecturers pay had fallen 7% behind school teachers, although they too omitted to mention the many PTLs who were on agency contracts for just £10.00 per hour. The lower requirements for agency staff were confirmed by the author in a ‘mystery shopper’ type telephone conversation with an agency when she was informed that she did not require a teaching qualification or teaching experience. Another NATFHE survey looked at the relationship between teaching quality and research and PTLs and concluded (p. 2):

there can be serious grounds for concern over the quality of teaching and learning delivered by some part-time staff—some departments were criti-
cised for making excessive use of under supervised part-time staff.

The new management strategies had other effects. Burrage and Stewart (1990) pointed to a range of sources of stress in FE, which included accountability, funding arrangements, managerialism, student and staff demography, new teaching and
learning approaches, pay and conditions, discipline, resources and morale, as being contributory factors, but perhaps dated their research by suggesting that: ‘stress continues to be more typical of unskilled and semi-skilled workers than of professionals’. This may indeed be a possible direction for future research. There appears to be a substantial body of work relating to stress in school teachers, and some relating to full-time FE lecturers (see for example Gibbons, 1998, using two psychometric measures), but stress levels of PTLs appears to be an under-researched area. Gibbons found a positive correlation between organisational change and stress levels, but suggested that out-of-work factors may also be very influential.

Support in the form of training and development for PTLs is also very important. Bryning (1991) surveyed PTLs in eight FE colleges and found that 67% of his respondents had a basic teaching qualification, but identified training needs in respect of assessment techniques, student-centred learning and study skills. The need for training and development was also true in the case of ‘failing’ teachers (Cunningham, 1997). Ollin (1996) highlighted the range of roles required, which included, in addition to teaching and supporting learning, assessing NVQs and GNVQs, APL and APEL, managing and so on. Ollin emphasised that training and accrediting staff as NVQ assessors was not the same as developing them as individuals, it was simply recognising competences. Lumby (1997) noted that management training remained focused on middle and senior management levels, whereas at the first line level (which may include PTLs) this may be lacking.

HRD policies which provide low-level training and serve to de-skill and devalue the status of teaching will have an adverse effect on the commitment of staff and ... the quality and competitiveness of service.

Tester (2000) provides an excellent up-to-date view of FE and the role of the PTL:

In the mid 1980s part-time lecturers accounted for only about 15–20% of the total workforce. But by 1999, this had leapt dramatically to 63%, with many recruited through agencies.

The article also notes that one in 10 (190 000) students completing degree level studies each year do so in FE and notes that:

Part-timers are seen as the front line of the flexible approach to learning that is now both demanded and expected but also highlights some contemporary concerns, namely that:

The bad news is not necessarily that part-time teachers do too much of the teaching in further education. It is that too many are not up to scratch.

The problem identified by Tester is that many PTLs are unqualified, but compulsory training would drive them away or act as a disincentive to entry.

In conclusion, themes identified from the literature review include:

- PTLs now deliver more than half of the class contact in FE but remain marginalised in respect of development;
• management strategies aimed at cost reduction and casualisation may have had a significant impact on full-time staff’s ability to engage with the professional aspects of the role and may have actually undermined professionalisation and commitment;
• a range of factors may impact negatively on service delivery;
• while there is much written about FE and the PTLs that work in it, the relationship between the factors identified remains lacking in empirical research.

The purpose of the field work to be undertaken was now to gather primary data in relation to these issues.

Methodology

Wild (1994) quotes Shakeshaft’s rationale for her use of qualitative methods in that:

research should grow out of the needs and experiences of the researcher so that the situation could be explored from the position of a woman who had some understanding of it.

The author had several years experience of teaching as a PTL in several FE institutions. Wild suggested that an empathy with the subject would lead to a more meaningful dialogue, based on the direct experience of the subjects. Similarly, Barnes and O’Hara (1999) pointed to the need for the research design to be relevant to the highly personal and complex nature of the data gathered and to help reach insights about the data gathered. At the same time, there was a desire to approach a larger sample than had been the case in some of the studies quoted and a desire to triangulate findings from a range of research strategies. To this end, a three stage process of data collection was attempted.

1. Questionnaires were distributed to 42 PTLs working in East Midlands FE colleges, who were doing between 1 and 33 (it was claimed!) hours per week. These questionnaires were qualitative, used mainly open questions, and gave respondents significant opportunity for self-expression. They were designed to gather a wide range of data that, even if it is not of immediate value, may be of use at a later stage or in subsequent research.

2. Key informant interviews were carried out with a small number of individuals who had significant experience of the FE sector and whose insights into the historical context were to prove particularly useful. They included a lecturer with 26 years experience in the same institution, in essentially the same role, a former FE head of division and GNVQ verifier now working in HE, another former head of division still working in FE who had ‘stepped down’ to a fractional appointment, individuals involved in training FE lecturers, some FE students and some of the sample of 42 above. Some of the latter were synthesised as case histories, which are included here as Appendix 2.

3. Focus group meetings were held with some members of the sample identified above to explore issues raised in the questionnaires and to resolve unanswered
dilemmas. As Morgan (1997) suggested, the best way to find answers to puzzling results is to ask the respondents!

Finally, responses from the above were then compared with the theory developed from the literature review, to reach overall conclusions and, more importantly at this stage, suggest directions for future research.

Findings

Considering first of all the case histories (which incidentally use pseudonyms), these reveal not untypical patterns of employment for the sector, as in the case of ‘Helen’, whose experience echoes Dearing’s (1996) assessment of ‘professional practitioners who deliver parts of the programme’. Many of the respondents reported very high levels of class contact, which was the criterion for the selection of the case histories here, but remained part of the ‘periphery’ in terms of training and contracts, in spite of engagement with many of the ‘managerial’ aspects of the role that 20 years previously would have been part of a promotion responsibility.

Key concerns among many respondents related to insecurity, for example:

Even though I’ve done part time work at the college for a few years now, I never know how much work there will be. Sometimes I’m given hours at the start of term but if they don’t have enough students, well that’s it and by the second week of term it’s too late to find work at other colleges.

I get £14.88 per hour for which I do one hours teaching plus lesson and resource prep, marking, see the students, liaise with the course leader, and they think I should attend meetings! All for less than £15.00 and at the end of term I don’t know if there will be any work for next year.

This necessary emphasis on the transactional nature of the relationship is forcing a change in perceptions of commitment: as Ollin (1996) suggested:

In the past a shared belief in the values and purpose of education, … gave a purpose and professional status to the occupation. In the current economic climate, many individuals are struggling to hold on to these values.

Some respondents echoed the concerns raised in the literature review about staff development:

I had to be asked to be included and when I was told that I could attend the training course I was reminded that I would not be paid for doing the course.

Some of the respondents were remarkably frank about their own limitations. One lecturer interviewed remarked:

Because of over-recruitment I was asked to do some work on a course, I didn’t refuse because I’d lost some hours. I thought it would be OK as the module leader was preparing everything. I will admit I wasn’t very good
and I didn’t really know the material and I floundered a bit but I don’t think anyone noticed and I suppose it was a good experience for me although students were less positive:

the course leader knows what’s going on but some of the part-time lecturers don’t know anything and we only find out what’s happening at the last minute. We had one who was useless, she did her own thing and we found out at the end we hadn’t covered all the topics.

On the subject of recruitment, this unexpectedly proved to be one of the most controversial findings of the survey, with many reported examples of questionable practices, including:

I had never taught before but I had lost my job and my friend was married to the head of division, he sorted me out a few hours and I liked it. When my youngest son went to school my husband suggested that I could teach tourism as I’d worked in the industry and our next door neighbour worked at the college and offered me 4 hours a week. I was a mature student and when I’d finished the course I wasn’t doing very well at finding a job; my tutor asked me if I’d like to do a few hours. My husband works in another department, but he knew (they) were struggling due to over-recruitment. I rang (the head of department) and was offered work over the phone, unseen and unknown. I had never taught before but as a hotel receptionist I had done some training. I turned up at 5.30 p.m., the course leader took me to the room and switched on the OHP for me and then left. I was scared stiff. I had never stood in front of a class before. I’m sure it was awful but it got better as the term went on and no-one said anything. I did 6–9 p.m. for the whole year and this year I’m doing two evenings and 2 hours on Friday mornings.

Some of the FE managers interviewed were also remarkably frank:

There simply isn’t time at the beginning of term to go through recruitment procedures. I need someone to stand in front of a class and if a colleague can recommend someone to me and they seem OK that’s fine.

One might observe that while many of these recruitment processes might appear ‘interesting’, they are by no means unknown and many colleagues will know of people who (even if they won’t admit it!) have entered educational careers under similar circumstances. What is significant is that given the proportion that PTLs now make up of the total workforce, this represents a significant departure from good recruitment practice.

Conclusions

The main issues surrounding part-time teaching in FE can be summarised as follows.
• FE continues to be subject to pressures such as cost effectiveness, on the one hand, and widening participation, on the other. What was once seen as the ‘Cinderella sector’ is now seen as a key means of delivering government targets for training, employability and education.

• PTLs offer significant cost and flexibility advantages over core employees and there is no problem with recruitment, even if turnover is high, so there is no incentive for college managers to adopt alternative, more permanent staffing strategies.

• The flexible PTL workforce continues to grow and becomes more diverse in its make-up, but there remains a need for this to become integrated into the core processes of colleges, such as staff development, recruitment and retention.

• A key feature of traditional FE was the ability to ‘add value’, but it achieved this through high levels of staff accessibility and informal pastoral support by ‘core’ staff. It is believed that this required level of support is inconsistent with the present staffing model, and this is a key item for future research.

At this interim stage the principal conclusion of this study into the issues surrounding part-time lecturers in FE is that it continues to grow and is becoming more diverse in its make-up, but also that college principals need to recognise this and positively encompass this flexible workforce. In order to achieve the stated educational aims of *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (1997, p. 4) the need is for:

a dynamic system able to respond to newly emerging needs with due purpose and flexibility and to promote curriculum innovation and raise the profile of teaching … .

*The Reality of Part-Time Work*

From the author's literature review, survey and interviews the author has found that pay and conditions are worse than full-time employees, there are typically no promotion prospects and very little training. Clearly, there needs to be more recognition of this situation in order to enhance commitment and participation from employees. The situation of greater demands from the employee is aided by new legislation and by the fact that this is a flexible workforce of professionals. Perhaps it is time for institutions to stop viewing part-time staff as merely a way of reducing costs; it is hoped that the flexible worker will be seen as a key tool in delivering quality and as such should be nurtured and resourced to deliver to their full potential. The authors entire survey is based on hourly paid women in the FE sector, many of whom need to work part-time because of family commitments. Given that fractional appointments with proper terms and conditions do not appear to be an option in the sector, women who need to work part-time have no choice but to accept hourly paid lecturing contracts or agency work. Many have a thorough dedication and commitment to their job, but as a result of hourly paid staffing strategies have inferior terms and conditions and are excluded and unsupported by college management teams. Nationally, the make-up of those who undertake part-
time work are changing as atypical work is now an option for a much wider group. Management in colleges need to re-think their traditional views and attitudes towards this sector of the workforce. Trends point to a future of flexibility: the achievement of success denoted by high ideals of commitment, responsiveness and quality rests on a vision of nurturing and properly resourcing the flexible worker.

References


**Appendix 1: Conflicting paradigms**

After Randle and Brady (1997), *Further Education and the New Managerialism*.

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**Appendix 2: Case histories**

Helen teaches music.

I do 28 hours teaching per week primarily teaching A-level music. To me getting the job was pure chance; the previous lecturer had left and I was ringing round colleges asking for part-time hours; I was just lucky. I have taught there for 4 years and do everything a full-time lecturer would do. I write assignments, coordinate performances and develop new units for courses, for which I receive no extra pay. I have asked more than once for a full-time contract but I’ve been told there is not much chance, it seems very unfair.

Diana teaches tourism.

I love my job but I feel very hurt about the way I’m treated. I do over 30 hours a week teaching, I run courses, assess, monitor and act as a tutor to the students. I have been there for 5 years, each year getting more and more hours but never a proper contract. I have asked times; sometimes they say they will try to sort something out but it never happens. I keep thinking that if I do more and take on admin and other duties unpaid then perhaps they’ll see what I do and give me a proper contract.

Louise teaches law.

I started doing a few hours in the evening when my children were small; that was 12 years ago! I do over 20 hours a week. I would love a fractional appointment but there’s no way the college would give me one; it’s much cheaper this way. I still feel quite isolated, I have never had an appraisal and there has never been any team building; I’m pretty much left alone. Until this year doing the PGCE no one had ever been in to see me teach!

Sandra teaches special needs groups.

I did a care course at the college and couldn’t find a job. One of the lecturers said there might be a few hours teaching so that’s how I started. Full-timers have left and not been replaced so there are lots of part-time hours but when you do over 20 hours like me it begins to seem unfair. I do everything, teach, assess, coordinate activities, organise trips and outings. I have loads of responsibility. I’ve asked my line manager about a full-time post but they are just not replacing people. I get no money in the holidays and although there are loads of hours I still don’t get to know what I’m doing and how many until a few days before.
Jane teaches accountancy.

I started doing 8 hours per week and now do 33! I got the job by being recommended by someone who taught there. I had no teaching experience but had the relevant qualification for accountancy. I usually get about a weeks notice before teaching starts. I have no contract and no job description. I do a lot of prep in my own time as well as other admin. I enjoy my job very much but increasingly feel that I am not treated fairly, especially as I do so much apart from teach, like being a personal tutor, writing assignments and admin. I have now worked at the college for 4 years and a full-time post has not been advertised in all that time for my subject. I am one of several part-timers teaching finance and accounting.