



# **Managing Organisational Culture in a merged General Further Education College in England: A Case Study**

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## List of Abbreviations

AoC	Association of Colleges
ARPCE	Association of Research in Post Compulsory Education
BERA	British Education Research Association
DfE	Department for Education
ESFA	Education and Skills Funding Agency
FE	Further Education
FEC	Further Education Commissioner
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
FETL	Further Education Trust for Leadership
GFEC	General Further Education College
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education institution
HMCI	Her Majesty's Chief Inspector
HRM	Human Resources Management
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
NGT	Nominal Group Technique
NPM	New Public Sector Management
OC	Organisational Culture
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
PO	Participant Observation
VET	Vocational Education and Training



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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to all staff working in Further Education. I am always inspired and humbled by your dedication, selflessness and commitment. It is your imagination, creativity and values that make FE the natural go to place for many adults, young and old, to realise their dreams and fulfil their potential, often with little or no recognition.

## **Abstract**

There has been a significant level of merger activity in General Further Education Colleges (GFEC) in England in recent years. GFEC mergers are of critical importance to understand and to inform the academic literature, policy and leadership professional practice. The need to understand how mergers impact on the experiences of key personnel has human, financial and practical implications for GFEC. This case study considered, in detail, the impact of a merger in a GFEC in England on key internal stakeholders: teachers, curriculum managers and senior leaders. It explored, through interviews with the Principal and the Chair of Governors, nominal group technique (NGT) and focus groups with eleven teachers and eight managers and through participant observations, the impact of the merger experience on them. The study analysed and reported on the lived experiences of participants to enable a detailed assessment of the impact of merger on the alignment of organisational culture between colleges during merger.

This study explored the interrelatedness of the different strands that impact merger such as leadership action, merger management, communication, policy and pace, to develop a deep understanding of their impact on staff morale, emotional wellbeing and trust in leadership. The importance of this study emanated from the need to build a college community of practitioners who subscribe to one goal and strive towards achieving that goal. This was important as it builds resilience and enables organisations (colleges) to make sense of reality, empowering them to meet the needs of their localities, communities and businesses. This study contributed to filling the knowledge gap by providing a detailed analysis of the different perspectives of internal stakeholders; teachers, curriculum managers and leaders, on the ways in which they have been affected by merger. It found that leadership decision making, communication, merger management and pace, have considerable impact on staff emotional wellbeing and trust in leadership. It found that to manage mergers successfully, more attention needed to be paid to the human side of merger in comparison to the transactional and performative side. The study found considerable interrelatedness between the human side of merger and how the merger was managed and conducted. This study also contributes to the body of literature with a specific nuance on FE policy influence on leadership professional practice, with respect to mergers. It argued that leadership decision making in mergers is a function of the neoliberal and performative policy environment, see

6.2. It argued that many GFEC merger failures can potentially be avoided if the policy environment was less performative and more values and human driven. This study posits that what is needed in FE is an alternative approach to policy-making based on a collegiate and distributed approach. An evidence-based policy rooted in professional practice rather than neoliberalism, is considerably more likely to achieve better outcomes for the FE sector. In this regard, this study contributes to the academic literature by providing an insider researcher perspective.

This study informs the GFEC leadership and management professional practice by arguing that mergers are complex and multifaceted therefore they need to be planned along more than one timeline, all of which need to be working in parallel and in tandem. The first timeline is the traditional timeline in which the transactional merger is enacted, the second is the plan to create a new organisational management structure, appoint to the new positions and align systems and processes, and the third is to plan people matters and the alignment of organisational culture. This way, leaders and other stakeholders start to view merger as a journey not an event and hence leads to better organisational wellbeing, organisational clarity and resilience.

The study argued that the current guidance is inadequate and needs to pay attention to people matters in the same way as it does for assets and legal matters. It needs to articulate the expectations for the human side and dedicate funding as is currently the case for other aspects of merger due diligence. The study further found that teachers and managers need to engage in regular reflective practice to aid understanding and the building of trust which in turn can help improve organisational culture and merger success.

# Chapter 1 Introduction

Mergers are common in General Further Education Colleges (GFEC), whereby two or more colleges dissolve as legal entities forming one (Chambers, 1983; Thompson, 1985). The number of mergers, post incorporation, that have taken place over a 26 year period (1993-2019), is 185, of which 66 have been since 2015. That is to say 36% of all college mergers in England took place since the inception of Area Based Review (ABR) in 2015, Association of Colleges (AoC, 2019). This unprecedented level of merger activity makes mergers in FE of critical importance to understand and to inform the academic literature, education policy and leadership professional practice.

Research into organisational culture within FE is of critical importance to the leadership and management discourse as well as to practice. It gives useful insights into the ability of managers and leaders to manage and lead beyond systems, processes, performativity and compliance (Schein, 1996; Anderson, 2007). Part of this importance, in line with the aims of this study, emanates from the need to be able to reconfigure and realign a college's culture during and following merger (Anderson, 2007).

The researcher's positionality, informed by his professional experience, was a belief that the human side of merger was of critical importance for the future success and resilience of the merged institution and the findings support the researcher's initial perspective. It follows that leadership teams and policy makers need to be far more concerned by human matters in comparison to financial, performative and legal matters. The findings of this study are becoming more timely and relevant at the time of writing because the frequency of GFEC merger activity and the learning from the Covid19 crisis. The Covid19 crisis has offered a real life example that it is the people of an organisation (especially in education, be it universities, colleges or schools) that give it resilience and keep it working remotely and not the buildings and other resources. This research aimed to explore, in depth, the lived experiences of teachers, middle and senior managers and leaders on how the alignment of the organisational culture of the two merged colleges affected them.

## 1.1 Practical Importance and Personal Motivation of the Study

The need to understand how mergers impact on the experience of key personnel has both human, financial and practical implications for GFEC. Over the last decade there have been merger failures in GFEC, such as K college (Popov and Cattoretti, 2019). The human cost for students and for staff has been considerable as well as significant financial losses (Popov and Cattoretti, 2019). Part of the challenge in GFEC is that there is no methodical mechanism for the sector to learn from its setbacks and failures. Setbacks provide major learning opportunities for individuals, organisations and sectors, yet GFEC fail to utilise these opportunities. It seems that as long as merger issues were related to organisational culture clashes, then they were beyond reproach. The official FE merger guidance by the Government (BIS, 2015) focuses on financials, estates and legal entities. This drive from policy makers combined with the lack of pronounced FE sector voice and knowledge base has led to merger management being focused on just that, together with a passing mention of organisational culture and the human side of staffing matters. The increase in magnitude and direction of mergers over time has made it necessary for a detailed understanding of the human side of merger. Sarala, Vaara and Junni, (2017) called for the need to deep dive to understand the human side of GFEC mergers. It is equally important to understand what underpins leadership professional practice during college mergers.

This research focussed on the perspectives of internal stakeholders; teachers, curriculum managers and leaders, by exploring the impact of (how) and (what) leadership teams do to align organisational culture in GFEC mergers. The centrality of organisational culture (OC) to the success of mergers in colleges was explored in depth (Buono, Bowditch and Lewis, 1985; Anderson, 2007). There was much debate in the academic literature on whether culture could be changed, whether it could be transplanted and whether it could be copied from one organisation into another (Martinez *et al.*, 2015). This work critically explored these possibilities. That is to say, if organisational cultures were not aligned in two colleges that were planning to merge, was it possible to align those two cultures or was it better to leave them as they were, or expect one to be subsumed with the other college's culture or indeed not to merge due to potential clash of cultures?

In the early 2000s, I was vice principal in a college that had merged five years previously. I was intrigued that almost every day, I would hear a reference to either of the two merged colleges. That intrigued me as it seemed that five years were not enough to merge the institution. As I developed in my senior leadership roles in the FE sector, I became less interested, personally and professionally, in systems, processes and performativity and at the same time more interested in people, what motivates them and how to interact with them.

The FE literature on the subject of organisational culture integration during merger is not rich but it does exist, for example Steen (2015). This study contributed to filling the knowledge gap by providing a detailed analysis of the different perspectives of internal stakeholders; teachers, curriculum managers and leaders, on the ways in which they have been affected by merger. It found that leadership decision making, communication, merger management and pace have considerable impact on staff emotional wellbeing and trust in leadership, see 6.4. It followed that for mergers to be managed successfully, more attention needed to be paid to the human side of merger in comparison to the transactional and performative side. The study found considerable interrelatedness between the human side of merger and how the merger was managed and conducted. This study also provided a critique of the impact of GFEC Policy on leadership professional practice. It argued that leadership decision making in mergers is a function of the neoliberal and performative decision making, see 6.2. It argued that many GFEC merger failures can potentially be avoided if the policy environment was less performative and more values and human driven. This study also contributes to the body of literature with a specific nuance on FE policy influence on leadership professional practice with respect to mergers. This study argues that merger leadership practice, in GFEC, is driven by the neoliberal performative policy environment which permeates FE.

This study informs the GFEC leadership and management professional practice by arguing that mergers are complex and multifaceted therefore they need to be planned along more than one timeline, all of which need to be working in parallel and in tandem. The first timeline is the traditional timeline in which the transactional merger is enacted, the second is the plan to create a new organisational management structure, appoint to the new positions and align systems and processes, and the third is to plan people matters and the alignment

of organisational culture, culture integration. This way, leaders and other stakeholders start to view merger as a journey not an event and hence leads to better organisational wellbeing, organisational clarity and resilience. The study argued that the current guidance is inadequate and needs to pay attention to people matters in the same way as it does for assets and legal matters. It needs to articulate the expectations for the human side and dedicate funding as is currently the case for other aspects of merger due diligence. The study further found that as teaching is a naturally reflective profession, engaging in regular reflective practice with managers can aid understanding and the building of trust which in turn can help improve organisational culture and merger success.

As part of the critique of the GFEC policy environment, this study argued the case for change to a values and human driven policy environment. This, in turn would enable GFEC to thrive and succeed. In this regard, this study contributes to the academic literature by providing an insider researcher perspective.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of internal stakeholders, namely teachers, curriculum managers and leaders, on the impact of mergers in general further education colleges (GFEC)?
2. What underpins college leadership professional practice in mergers?

The study was designed to achieve the following aims:

- **Aim 1:** To develop a deep understanding of the lived experiences of internal stakeholders, namely teachers, managers and leaders, by examining how merger impacts them, to inform the academic literature and professional practice.
- **Aim 2:** To explore and examine what underpins college's leadership professional practice during merger.



As to accomplish the above, the following objectives were set:

- **Objective 1:** Explore the ways in which teachers, managers and leaders are affected by college merger
- **Objective 2:** Explore the main drivers (what) and (how) to affect Organisational Culture alignment in a GFEC merger
- **Objective 3:** To critically examine the drivers for professional practice in a GFEC merger and to provide recommendations for decision makers

### **1.3 Thesis Structure**

The thesis is organised in seven chapters as follows.

Chapter 1: Introduction – briefly describing the GFE context and aims of this study, my personal motivation for this study and the potential practical impact of this study on college mergers.

Chapter 2: Literature Review – The review of the literature was transformative for this study. It initially started in a linear approach by critically evaluating the academic literature on leadership, change, FE colleges and mergers. It however transpired that the subject needed to be approached differently by critically evaluating the FE policy environment and how policy impacted professional practice in FE. This then led to an interesting and transformative view of GFEC professional practice, how it is impacted by policy and how it impacts staff emotional wellbeing, a sense of fragility, recognition of professional expertise (or lack of) and trust in leadership. For this purpose, the literature review had to reflect substantially the FE policy environment and how it drives GFECs professional practice. For example, it considers the FE Policy environment and the ways in which the neoliberal performativity of FE policy drives professional practice. It explores the impact of leadership decision making on staff wellbeing and how notions of trust and emotional wellbeing are

affected during merger. The review also considers mergers in general as well as in more detail in GFECs and how they are impacted by policy and how they impact people.

Chapter 3: Methodology – The methodology provided a most interesting and challenging journey of discovery in philosophical stances and the importance of epistemic values in research (Thomas, 2006). The chapter charts the journey of learning into philosophical stances, methodological approaches and the reasoning for a case study to be the method employed in this study.

Chapters 4 (Part 1) and 5 (Part 2) report the Findings by providing insightful view of the lived experiences of participants. Importantly, the methodological approach manifested the importance of ensuring distancing the researcher from the participants' discussions to mitigate, as far as practically possible, researcher bias. This was especially important as it enabled the voices and lived experiences of participants, to become pronounced and revelatory. So for example, though unanticipated, it was profound that participants utilised the focus group sessions as opportunities for reflection and introspection. The findings were too large to be meaningfully reported in one chapter, for this reason they have been split into two chapters.

Chapter 6: Discussion – This chapter disentangled the impact of the neoliberal FE policy discourse and how it impacts professional practice, agency and (dis)empowerment. It posits that leadership professional practice is impacted by the FE policy framework just as much as every other aspect of GFEC life. It also posits that acts of obedience to policy render FE leadership complicit in this systemic failure. It follows that mergers in FE are managed in ways that follow Government guidance but don't necessarily lead to merger success, principally because issues around people do not occupy centre stage in GFEC policy, leadership thinking or professional practice. This chapter also critically examines the impact of neoliberal policy on staff agency and hence on their emotional wellbeing and trust in leadership.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations – this chapter makes conclusions and recommendations for FE policy, FE professional practice and future research. Critically importantly, GFEC mergers need to be considered along three distinct timelines (i.e. merger

pace), with three corresponding action plans, that are related and move forward in tandem but are not the same. These timelines and corresponding action plans are: 1. Enactment of Merger (legal, asset and financial), 2. Management Organisation Structure, decisions about Systems and Processes and 3. People Merger, the full and final phase to produce a fully functioning unified purposeful merged college.

# Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

## 2.1 Introduction

The review of the literature for this study was approached in a methodical manner by exploring themes in the literature such as 'merger', 'organisational culture' with specific focus on 'post-merger integration', 'organisational change leadership', 'Further Education mergers', 'merger and communication', 'Trust Leadership', and 'mergers and staff emotional wellbeing'. Google Scholar was found to be effective in locating recent peer reviewed research. Key research databases such as ProQuest, Academic Search, JSTOR and Scopus were used extensively and visited regularly to maintain an up to date view of the literature.

My own experience of the subject and knowledge of key researchers have helped inform my research approach considerably. For example, I already knew of the main FE research outlets including the Association of Research in Post Compulsory Education (ARPCE), the British Education Research Association (BERA) and British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS). I reviewed both peer reviewed publications and grey literature to provide a thorough account of the policy, practice and research contexts in which the topic of mergers had been discussed. These included publications by Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) and Association of Colleges (AoC). My research included reviewing publications as well as attending conferences and seminars.

Having started by reviewing the merger literature coming from the business world, I realised that this literature was not adequate to understand the nuances and specific features and needs of the FE and educational sector. The FE sector's values and culture are unique to it, though they are shared with the adult learning community sector and post 92 universities (Dhillon, 2007). Furthermore, critical examination of the FE sector literature has led to the understanding that mergers in FE are largely a function of FE policy and that the professional practice in leadership, just as many other aspects of FE professional practice, are driven by policy too (Coffield *et al.*, 2007; Orr, 2009; Gleeson *et al.*, 2015). This

understanding has led to a deep and critical analysis of the FE policy literature in relation to how it impacts professional practice. For this reason, FE sector context and FE policy are the starting point for this chapter.

The structure of this chapter starts with policy to enable the reader, especially those outside the FE sector and/or those outside England, to develop an appreciation of the field of study. The chapter then progresses towards an examination of organisational culture, merger, post-merger integration and mergers in FE. The final section of this chapter explores, in detail, the literature on organisational change leadership and communication, hence enabling an appreciation of the impact on key stakeholders (people), especially on the emotional wellbeing of staff and trust in leadership.

## **2.2 FE Policy and Change Context**

The history of the technical and vocational education system in England can be traced back to the eighteenth century with the establishment of technical schools near industrial centres (Gillard, 2011; Orr, 2018). General Further Education Colleges (GFEC) developed over the ensuing 150 years in size and sophistication but not as an interrelated sector. GFEC were under local authority control with elected members on Boards of Governors and Principals reporting to senior officers in local education authorities. GFEC were removed from local authority control and set up as independent corporations, a process otherwise known as 'incorporation', in 1992 in compliance with the Further and Higher Education Act (HM-Government, 1992). The Act set up a policy framework of marketisation, performativity and control by policy makers for the sector which still exists today (Simmons, 2010; Hodgson and Spours, 2015; Daley, Orr and Petrie, 2017). It is important however not to view incorporation as the start of performativity and competition but rather as a further and more concrete step towards the erosion of autonomy and meaningful recognition of the role of FE as part of the post compulsory education system (Elliott, 2015). It could be argued that incorporation gave independence and self-government but enabled divide and rule. In fact, the FE sector had been characterised by 'fragmentation, confusion, complexity and competition' long before incorporation (Twyman, 1985: 329-330). This performativity and

control stems from a policy framework rooted in neoliberal philosophy (Simmons, 2010; O’Leary, 2015). Smith and O’Leary (2013: 245) describe it in a rather emotive yet meaningful way by saying that ‘FE in England can be regarded as the crucible in which an emerging model of marketisation in education has been tested out’.

In 2005 the New Labour Government commissioned Sir Andrew Foster to review Further Education to advise on the key challenges and opportunities facing Further Education (Foster, 2005). The report, *Realising the Potential*, listed a number of important recommendations which the then Government accepted (Foster, 2005). Such recommendations as an agreed purpose for the sector ‘mission’ which policy, practice and regulation would need to conform to, are clearly central to the development of the sector. Almost all of the recommendations, including having an agreed mission, are yet to be implemented. This failure of past and current governments to act on independent reports reflects policy makers’ potential lack of willingness to commit to advancing the FE policy framework beyond rhetoric (Elliott and Crossley, 1997; Hodgson and Spours, 2015). O’Leary (2015) argues that the neoliberal thinking which underpins FE policy has resulted in FE not progressing and realising its potential.

More recently, the Augar Review (Augar, 2019) of post-18 education and funding, published in June 2019, failed to have its recommendations accepted by the Conservative Government that commissioned it, although the commissioning Prime Minister, Theresa May, and the one that followed, Boris Johnson, had voiced their support but stopped short of committing to the recommendations (Hubble and Bolton, 2019). Recommendations such as additional capital investment or increases in Level 2/3 bursary and funding for 18-year-old young people on vocational programmes could have transformational impact on GFECs. In between the Foster and Augar reviews there have been many others (Wolf, 2007).

Table 2.2.1 summarises some of the reviews and reports into Further Education. These provide a view of the rate of change that the FE sector has been subjected to since incorporation in 1992. The table only shows reviews and reports, not strategies, initiatives, White and Green Papers and policy changes.

**Table 2.2.1 Summary of Reviews and Reports into FE**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>1992</b>	Incorporation of Colleges Further and Higher Education Act	The colleges of further education, sixth form colleges and tertiary colleges were to be removed from the control of local education authorities (LEAs) and were funded through the Further Education Funding Councils; one for England and one for Wales. It represented the most significant change to the FE system including employment conditions of lectures in further education. Colleges had to compete in a marketized education system in which stronger (larger, better resourced, or more entrepreneurial) colleges thrived at the expense of others, which led to some college closures and mergers.
<b>1995</b>	[Beaumont Review] Into FE curriculum	This was a review of the most used 100 NVQs (England) and SVQs (Scotland). To improve performance and motivation; increase flexibility and preparedness for future work demands; improve quality of goods and services; and more cost-effective training.
<b>1996</b>	[Dearing Review]. Review of Qualifications for 16-19 year olds	The aim of Dearing's review was to encourage greater parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications. It contained 198 recommendations to strengthen, consolidate and improve the framework of 16-19 qualifications.
<b>1996</b>	[Tomlinson Report] Inclusive Learning: Principles and recommendations	This report called for colleges to embrace the idea of 'inclusive learning'. It wanted every member of staff to consider the individual needs of all learners rather than just those previously categorised as having 'special needs'.
<b>1997</b>	<b>New Labour come to power</b>	
<b>1997</b>	[Kennedy Report] Learning Works: widening participation in Further Education	To set out an agenda for change to increase access to post-16 learning and to improve the quality of learners' achievements. The key ideas in the report were equity in access, focus on achievement at Level 3, re-prioritization of funding and overcoming inefficiency.
<b>1997</b>	[Fryer Report] Learning for the Twenty First Century.	It makes the case for the development of a culture of lifelong learning for all, throughout the whole of the United Kingdom.
<b>1997</b>	[Dearing Review] The 14–19 curriculum	This Review proposed a national framework covering all the main qualifications and the achievements of young people at every level of ability. It recognised achievements outside the main formal qualifications, as part of a restructured and relaunched National Record of Achievement. As qualifications appropriate for 16-19 year olds are relevant to people of all ages, it took into account the needs of adults, particularly those studying part-time.
<b>1999</b>	[Moser Report] A Fresh Start: Improving Literacy and Numeracy	This report looked at the basic skills issue in England; "the ability to read, write and speak in English and to use Mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general". It involved using ICT to make the study programme more accessible as an effective and engaging method.
<b>2005</b>	[Foster Review] Realising the Potential: A Review of the Future Role of Further Education	This review was to advise on the key challenges and opportunities facing Further Education (FE) colleges. Through research and extensive consultation, this report emphasised the values of greater clarity of mission, improved leadership, organisation and management and a relentless focus on the needs of learners and business as the criteria for progress.

<b>2006</b>	[Gilbert Report] 2020 Vision: Report of the Teaching and Learning 2020 Review Group	It identified key areas to transform the education for children and young people by 2020. These included high quality teaching, engaging parents and carers, personalised learning, strong focus on progress and systematic innovation.
<b>2006</b>	[Leitch Review] Prosperity for all in the Global Economy – World Class Skills	It recommended the UK commits to becoming a world leader in skills by 2020. To achieve these ambitious objectives, the following principles were recommended: shared responsibility, focus on economically valuable skills, demand-led skills and adaptation and response.
<b>2010</b>	<b>Coalition Government came into power</b>	
<b>2010</b>	[Silver Report] Towards a Strong Careers Profession	Set a vision for a transformed careers workforce in England which can offer young people the excellent careers service they deserve and expect.
<b>2011</b>	[Wolf Review] of Vocational Education	It set out to improve vocational education for 14-19 years old and promote successful progression into the labour market and into higher level education and training routes.
<b>2012</b>	[Holts Review] Into Apprenticeships	Review of apprenticeships and their accessibility to small and medium-sized enterprises. Advised on how employers can have more control in the apprenticeship system, get the best from their training providers, simplifying ownership and responsibility for the apprenticeships programme and removing barriers.
<b>2012</b>	[Lingfield Report] Professionalism in FE – Report of the Independent Review Panel	It considered the nature of FE in England, contrasting the diversity of intention and role which policy places upon it, with the clarity of purpose. It makes observations and proposed cases as conforming to the thrust of the government's policy.
<b>2012</b>	[Richard Review] of Apprenticeships	The review called on the government to improve the quality of apprenticeships and make them more focused on the needs of employers. The recommendations included: redefining apprenticeships, focusing on the outcome of an apprenticeship, recognising industry standards, level of English and Maths and incentives for apprenticeships.
<b>2013</b>	[McLoughlin Report] A Commission on Adult Vocation Teaching & Learning (CAVTL)	This was a report about the future role of vocational teaching and learning in supporting individuals, businesses and communities to grow and succeed.
<b>2015</b>	<b>Conservative Government came into power</b>	
<b>2016</b>	[Sainsbury Review] into Technical Education	It was tasked with advising ministers on actions to improve the quality of technical education in England and, in particular, to simplify the existing over-complex system and ensure the new system provides the skills most needed for the 21st century.
<b>2019</b>	[Augar Review] - Post-18 review of education and funding	Review of post-18 education in England which aimed to improve learning and training for adults of all abilities, and to rebalance resources between higher and further education while minimising additional costs.

Source: Hadawi, A. 2020



The English FE system has been, and still is, going through unprecedented levels of change in policy context, purpose (mission), regulation and in the pace of change (Grummell and Murray, 2015; Hodgson and Spours, 2015). It is said that it is a sector in crisis, a 'permanent' crisis, as a way of being for FE (Elliott, 1996a, 2015; Robson, 1998; Goddard-Patel and Whitehead, 2000). Elliott (2015) argues that post compulsory education in England, both FE and HE, are in crisis, principally due to constant reform driven by endless policy change. A key point is that even the reference to FE as a sector is itself problematic, as it is called a sector by policy makers but it does not have the hallmarks of a sector, not even an agreed mission (Keep, 2018).

### **2.2.1 FE Policy Context**

The policy context that governs GFEC is of critical importance to this study as policy in FE drives professional practice in almost every aspect, from teaching, learning and assessment to leadership and management, a view shared by many academics e.g. (Elliott, 1996b; Spours, Coffield and Gregson, 2006; Coffield *et al.*, 2007; Smith and Bailey, 2007; Orr, 2009; Boocock, 2013, 2014, 2019). The FE policy environment is complex, multi-layered and multifaceted (Coffield *et al.*, 2007; Orr, 2009). The relationship between policy and practice is not straight forward (Coffield *et al.*, 2007; Orr, 2009). According to Orr (2009: 1) there is a gap between policy and practice,

'... a symbiosis of performativity has evolved where the government produces targets and colleges produce mechanisms to 'evidence' their achievement, separate to any change in practice and thus maintaining the gap between policy and practice'.

We need to see how policies are taken up, where, by whom, how and to what ends, as they are not simply read as policy text to assume what will happen (Taylor, 1997). This view of policy, which governs FE, is underpinned by a neoliberal ideology of performativity and managerialism (Coffield *et al.*, 2007; Gleeson *et al.*, 2015; O'Leary, 2015; Boocock, 2019). It is referred to as the New Public Sector Management paradigm, known across other public sectors as NPM (Pollitt, 1995). The ideology of NPM is borrowed as a management model from the private sector, having moved into the public sector broadly, and not just in education (Pollitt, 1995). It is underpinned by a thinking paradigm that private sector

ideology and market forces can drive quality and efficiency in the public sector and in this case education and training (Elliott, 1996a; Keep, 2007; Boocock, 2013).

Funding and regulation methodologies, across all political colours; Conservative, New Labour and Coalition, are rooted into this neoliberal thinking philosophy (Simmons, 2010; Smith and O'Leary, 2013). One of the key aspects to neoliberal ideology is the externality of monitoring and regulation. To be more precise, the ideology runs on a very deep tension between giving freedom to the individual to choose and trusting the market as an effective and efficient driver, and the increased control, bureaucratization, loss of trust in societal institutions and therefore in their autonomy. It essentially does not trust the professional. So for example in education, there is Ofsted as a regulator of quality (Holmes, 1993). O'Leary (2015) suggests that the impact of performative policy on teachers led to an experience of increased levels of disempowerment, anxiety and general discontent. It is not inconceivable that this notion of disempowerment can be extended to other practitioners in the Further Education system including leaders at all levels. All tertiary levels of education (FE and HE) have been impacted profoundly by these changes (Ball, 2012). This conceptualisation leads us to consider that what is needed is a system based on trust and recognition of the professionalism of the educator.

In GFEC, policy drives practice but that is not to be confused with policy achieving its intended aims. The GFEC approach to policy implementation has been described as 'Catholic' (Orr, 2009). GFEC focus on producing the evidence to demonstrate conformity to policy and absolve themselves from responsibility as opposed to achieving the intention of policy (Orr, 2009). It is important to reflect that the current simplistic performativity approach to compliance does not achieve policy objectives (Orr, 2018).

One of the FE policy challenges is the constant state of change and reform, which does not give GFEC a chance to consolidate and orient themselves to meet local needs nor consider whether this change is in line with FE's mission (Simmons, 2008; Boocock, 2019). There are many consequences for this constant and rapid state of change but two are identified as critical to this study: not having an agreed mission (purpose for existence), and not having a pronounced sector voice (Lucas and Crowther, 2016). Hadawi and Crabbe, (2018) posit that

the FE sector suffers from multifaceted and structural challenges, many of which were detailed in the Foster Review (Foster, 2005) but were never meaningfully tackled, let alone resolved, by successive governments. The sector was being subjected to what Foucault would refer to as the 'normalising gaze' through the neoliberal technologies of bureaucratic and managerial surveillance mentioned above (Foucault, 1991). Wolf (2007) argued that the 'frenetic' approach to skills policy-making may be part of the problem. This view is shared by many academics e.g. (Smith and O'Leary, 2013; Bailey and Unwin, 2014; Elliott, 2016; Orr, 2018; Guile and Unwin, 2019; Locke and Maton, 2019). FE policies have been developed in a neoliberal context in which the gaining of skills is part of a human capital approach to the value of the individual. FE, like HE, has become the context where the political and the economy find a terrain to thrive, both impacting not only on the teaching and learning, but also on the way colleges are managed, led and governed.

The issue of not having a pronounced sector voice has led FE to have no means to challenge policy even when it has the evidence in support of alternative means for achieving better outcomes, a view widely accepted by many academics, see (Elliott, 1996b; Spours, Coffield and Gregson, 2006; Coffield *et al.*, 2007; Keep, 2007; Hadawi, 2019). Coffield *et al.* (2004: 135) argue the perfectly logical point that 'proposed [policy] change may make matters worse', the nuance being because the sector has no means of challenging policy, it ends up implementing what it sometimes knows won't work, and leading, in part, to Orr's earlier point about the 'Catholic' approach to policy implementation. O'Leary (2015) argues that the FE sector is 'heavily determined by the sovereign control of [policy] Ofsted'. This 'heavy determination' being a straight implementation of policy without questioning, challenging or even suggesting alternatives that might work better, at least to reflect the depth of expertise and insight in the sector, as earlier contemplated by Coffield *et al.* (2008).

### **2.2.2 Learning, Management and Leadership**

In a learning context, Sayer (2010) argues that student teacher relationships impact learning more than the knowledge passed through the teaching process. I find myself drawn to this meaning as my experience as an educator and as a leader affirms this aspect of

relationship building. Equally, in my experience, the management of staff in GFEC, requires reasoning and relationship building to enable the right environment for change to succeed and stick (Hayes, 2018). Devecchi and Potter (2020) go further by arguing that, as organisations are based on learning, then managers and leaders are in the position of teachers and therefore communication is not just the passing of the information but it is the way in which knowledge is acquired, shared, transformed and applied that matters. This, in turn, will offer a more sophisticated and nuanced view of compliance with policies and procedure rather than a simplistic performativity and managerialist approach that has been prevalent since the 1990s (Holmes, 1993). It follows that a more collegiate approach to leadership and decision making leads to better team working and higher aspirations which will help improve organisational performance, much more than performativity and management dictate that have been prevalent in FE policy (Holmes, 1993). It is indeed these relationships that enable leaders to tap into their colleagues' inner abilities to improve job satisfaction and bring out the best in any organisation to build resilience and enhance performance (Giessner, Dawson and West, 2013). Giessner *et al.* (2006) argue for the need to find pronounced perspectives on meaning making, shared meanings, shared experiences, management investing in taking their staff with them through effective, affiliative management and communication.

### **2.2.3 Larger, better and more resilient colleges – Paving the road to mergers**

In September 2015, the Conservative Government decided to review the structure of Further Education colleges based on regional geography in England through a series of five waves of Area Based Reviews (ABR) (HM-Government, 2016). The intent was to reduce the number of colleges in England through mergers and produce what the then minister for FE, Nick Boles, called 'larger, better and more resilient' colleges (Boles, 2015). Yet, as Keep (2016) argues, the real reason was to cut costs and to achieve what HM-Government (2016: 11) stipulate as 'significant net savings in the longer term'. This, as a consequence, created a fierce battle for survival, retrenchment and distrust between colleges at local level (Hodgson and Spours, 2017; Keep, 2018). It is however worth noting that mergers in Further Education do not ordinarily lead to cost savings as the Government's own commissioned research seems to suggest (Payne, 2008). More recent research, however, also Government

commissioned, gave a more nuanced view with a full spectrum of possible outcomes, which are equally inconclusive (Popov and Cattoretti, 2019). Popov and Cattoretti (2019: 14) specifically recommend 'Deep dives into specific merger cases to understand...the factors...mergers successful or unsuccessful.....involving interviews with relevant stakeholders...'. Therefore, this research contributes to filling the knowledge gap that was historically identified by many academics e.g. (Stewart, 2003; Payne, 2008; Bradley and Capuccinello, 2016; Elliott, 2016) and remains important as reported by Popov and Cattoretti (2019).

One can argue that while we do have some evidence about the negligible financial impact, some researchers e.g. Tourish and Hargie (2004b) argue that the factors impacting negatively on staff and success are many and are not amenable to quantitative research. Therefore, this study will contribute to enriching the literature and informing professional practice into the human cost of merger by delving into the impact of merger on staff morale, wellbeing and engagement. The potential from this study extends across the post-18 education landscape in view of the Auger review (2019) if it gets implemented; a big 'if'.

This chapter has established the impact of FE policy on FE professional practice and summarised the context in which FE policy operates. The chapter discussed the role of performativity and neoliberal ideology in driving FE policy. The remainder of this chapter will focus on organisational culture and how they are impacted during merger as well as the human cost of merger.

### **2.3 Organisational Culture**

Edward Tyler cited in Samuel *et al.* (2017: 86), a British anthropologist, defined culture as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, arts, beliefs, law, custom, morals and various other habits and capabilities attained by an individual as a being within society'. This definition formed the basis for organisational culture theorists in developing their definitions (Samuel *et al.*, 2017). One of the main organisational culture researchers, Schein (1996),

posits a model to aid the understanding of organisational culture as layers that can peel away. He divided an organization's culture into three distinct levels: artefacts, values, and assumptions. Artefacts are the overt and obvious elements of an organization. They are, typically, the things an outsider can see, such as furniture and office layout and dress norms. This model is helpful in enabling leaders to develop a better insight into how they can understand and navigate organisational culture in meaningful ways. Alongside his model, Schein defines organisational culture as 'the basic tacit assumptions about how the world is and ought to be that a group of people share and that determines their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and, their overt behaviour' (Schein, 1992: 25). He further posits that 'the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture' (25). Schein's model is helpful in a transactional leadership domain by enabling leaders to deal with complex constructs such as culture, in an accessible and manageable manner. Thus it is helpful in an FE context, a largely transactional leadership domain, made so by the neoliberal, NPM ideology, as discussed in 2.2.1. Handy (1984) offers an alternative model in which different strands of culture are at play but to different levels of intensity depending on the organisation and its context. Dopson and McNay (1996) argue that most organisations will have all four types of Handy's model but at different levels of dominance, see Table 2.2. Cartwright and Cooper (1994) developed Handy's cultural model further by positing that it represents a 'cultural continuum' within an organisation but different aspects are more pronounced than others. When considering mergers, cultures cannot be described as strong or weak cultures as this does not serve the purpose of understanding organisational culture to aid merger success.

A more meaningful question to ask, is whether the organisational culture is advantageous in achieving the organisation's mission and goals, or is it a hindrance and disadvantageous to the organisation? This way, an organisation's culture can be an enabler (or not) for the organisation to become more resilient, thriving and successful in meeting its mission. It is the alignment of the organisational mission, culture, values and goals that normally enable staff and leaders to have a common platform of rights and responsibilities for any organisation to become resilient and successful. This way staff and leaders will be working to a common goal and aligned with their values.

**Table 2.2 Handy's Culture Strands**

<b>Culture Type</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Power Culture</b>	A power source, typically the leader, sets the scene and hence decisions are made to satisfy this leader. Such culture exercises significant control, normally by the leader, and hence tends to have lower levels of trust and autonomy.
<b>Role Culture</b>	Tends to be represented through a traditional bureaucracy of functions and structures via committees and subcommittees. The organisation is managed through processes, procedures and compliance. Staff are managed by senior managers through compliance and performativity. Position power tends to be centre stage with no space for personal power. This type of culture is traditionally economically efficient but inflexible and tied to management structures and positions.
<b>Task Culture</b>	Represented through the dominance of the organisational mission where all actions are focused on meeting the mission. Teams have more influence and power tends to be distributed throughout the organisation. Organisation members tend to express more passion and commitment to the organisation and to their teams. It can come across as though it is disorganised and fluid during difficult times. One of the key risks to this culture is 'mission drift' as teams and individuals might engage in matters that are not central to the mission, with little or no control.
<b>People Culture</b>	Represented through the individuals within the organisation. Control mechanisms are very difficult and are exercised through mutual consent. Autonomy and control of one's own work is a real motivator and hence employees are highly committed and supportive. However, conflict is suppressed in the interest of harmony without dealing with any serious underlying issues.

Source: Dopson and McNay (1996)

Brown and Humphreys (2003: 121) identified the need for shared narratives as means of developing shared vision not only for sense making but potentially more acutely needed to counter what 'may be hegemonic and have psychic prison effects'. They argue that shared narratives are better placed in enabling alterations in people's understandings which are detailed in their perceptions and lived experiences. Shared narratives align to the work around creating safe spaces for reflection to enable trust building (Searle and Ball, 2004; Illes and Mathews, 2015; Donovan, 2019). These shared narratives are the same as what Burnes, Hughes and By (2016) call shared leadership, at all levels but with a common purpose.

Buono, Bowditch and Lewis (1985), argue the need for ten years to create a new culture, others stipulate seven years. The point here is that it all depends on the context of the previous organisations (colleges), the current context, how culture is being prioritised and managed. One needs to recognise that culture will develop whether leaders directly act in changing it or whether it will develop as part of the change being experienced due to a merger. The point is how leaders in merger situations develop, control and sustain a specific culture and whether this culture is an enabler for future success or not. More importantly, it gives a nuanced message that in a merger situation, people should not expect culture to fall in line as soon as the merger is enacted and that it takes a considerable amount of time and effort to bring together. Locke (2007) warns that the impact on staff, students and other key stakeholders is considerable during merger and that organisational integration is critical for the success of mergers and hence the future merged institution.

Steen (2015) argued the need for culture due diligence to inform merger planning and implementation. He essentially posits that merger due diligence can yield valuable information such as the culture differences between the two merging colleges, key internal players and important matters that are non-negotiable to inform the planning stage.

## **2.4 Complexity of Mergers**

Mergers are complex and hence need to be afforded sufficiently complex model(s) for understanding and navigating the stages of interconnected processes, most importantly how people's experiences shape these processes and are shaped by them (Brown and Humphreys, 2003). Weick and Quinn (1999: 375) posit that mergers are 'ongoing, evolving, and cumulative' which leads us to consider that mergers are not easily managed with a specific starting point and an end point but are complex and multifaceted. The evolving aspect of a merger leads us to contemplate that different stages rely on other stages and processes to be enacted. Equally, the cumulative aspect of a merger leads us to consider that more than one strand of work might need to work in tandem to enable a certain stage to be enacted. Brown and Humphreys (2003), argue that managerialism and performative instructions are mere punctuations in the flow of organisational life. It follows that the



fulfilment of intentions is more dependent on interpretation and meaning making than intricacies of decisions and levels of compliance. This study will contribute in this regard by delving deep into the emotions and meaning making of key stakeholders such as the Principal, Chair, teachers and managers.

#### **2.4.1 Merger Failures**

The prevalence of merger failure rate, about 50% on average, makes it incumbent upon leaders and managers to learn to manage mergers better to increase the possibility of success (Koi-Akrofi, 2016). They argue that the culture integration stage of a merger process was the most problematic leading to failure. They further report that culture due diligence is critical in informing the culture integration stage.

Poor culture integration leads to 'cultural indigestion and the eventual divestiture of units that cannot become culturally integrated' (Schein, 1990: 117). The literature reports that organisational culture diversity, communication and employee mix of the two organisations, have a direct impact on the post-merger organisation integration (Ghosh and Dutta, 2016). Mohibullah (2009) highlighted important aspects that contribute to merger failure. These being ambiguity, poor communication, cultural problems, improper management of cultural integration and improper acculturation process.

During merger, aspects of clear and authentic communication, including communication of motivation for merger are considered to be fundamental to merger success (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2000). They also argue that during merger system and process changes, decisions on roles, responsibilities and structures all interrelate and affect staff and form aspects of culture integration. Lundqvist (2012) argued that senior managers can offer organisational clarity through finalising the newly merged organisation management structure and early appointment to it so that the new organisation has a full management compliment.

Merger failure leads to considerable financial losses as well as to a profound impact on employee morale and wellbeing (Buono and Bowditch, 2003). One example from two organisations that were successful in their own right was the Daimler-Chrysler merger (Hollmann, Carpes and Beuron, 2010). The financial losses of the merger were c. \$29b, a considerable amount for any organisation, as well as the human and reputation costs that were well articulated in the literature (Bogenschutz and Wright, 2000). Williams, Roberts and Shires (2019) reported that much of the emphasis in mergers is on systems and processes even though it is culture that impacts merger success or failure more. This study was focused on the lived experiences of staff during merger to help develop a deeper understanding of post-merger cultural integration, the emotional wellbeing of staff, their fragility and their sense of value.

Buono and Bowditch (2003) report that mergers have a profound impact on employee motivation and emotional wellbeing. It therefore follows that mergers need to be managed with employee emotions forming an important part of the merger planning and management (Schein, 2010). Equally, it also follows that leaders need to develop a deep insight of the emotional impact of merger on individuals and teams so that such aspects can be managed in ways that enable staff to buy-into the merger (Sales and Mirvis, 1984).

Cartwright and Cooper (2014) suggest that the closer the two organisations' cultures on the culture continuum, the more readily a new culture can be formed in the post-merger organisation. The point is logically acceptable as people will feel less difference, less threatened and they will have more alignment with the other organisation's values and the way they do things.

#### **2.4.2 Mergers in FE**

Payne (2008) identified 72 mergers in the FE sector between 1993 and 2008 resulting in 43 merged institutions and found no evidence of financial gains 'rescued' from mergers. There are two types of merged institutions in the FE sector. Most common are mergers between

FE colleges and less common are mergers between Higher Education institutions (HEIs) and GFEC. Since incorporation in 1992, there have been 185 college mergers of which 66 (36%) were completed since the inception of the ABR in September 2015 (AoC, 2019). Calvert (2009) identified two main drivers for FE mergers:

- Rescue, in which a struggling college is 'rescued' by, and usually amalgamated into, a more affluent college or
- Strategic, in which two colleges that are already fairly successful merge because they believe they will be stronger if combined.

The former of the drivers is the one that is normally driven by policy makers and has formed the main determinant during the ABR (Hodgson and Spours, 2019b).

The pressures and challenges that practitioners in FE (lecturers and leaders) are experiencing, due to mergers and change more broadly, are considerable (Keep, 2007; Elliott, 2016). One of the key challenges is to navigate the complexities of mergers, especially organisational culture integration, trust and the emotional wellbeing of staff (Razi and Garrick, 2019). Wyngaard and Kapp (2004) posit that considerable planning and ongoing open communication are necessary to help deal with people issues during merger. This importance emanates, in part, from the need for colleges to continue their operations whilst going through merger and hence positive merger experiences would have a direct impact on learners' experience, success, retention and progression (Bradley and Capuccinello, 2016). They specifically report that mergers have a causal effect on the probability of student dropout leading to financial penalties and low Ofsted inspection grades.

FE college merger guidance is focussed on financials, asset and legal arrangements (BIS, 2015). There is no guidance on how to align the cultures of the merged colleges to produce single institutions that are unified in their values, norms and goals. However, there is academic literature which has the capacity to inform professional practice in this domain, e.g. (Stewart, 2003; Steen, 2015). The norm for FE practice is that it is informed by policy rather than by research evidence (Orr, 2009). Furthermore, FE sector research is invisible and does not tend to inform professional practice (Elliott, 1996b; Solvason and Elliott, 2013).

There seems to be a lethal combination consisting of a: Government edict to merge colleges within a short time window (see 2.2.3), coupled with little focus on cultural alignment during and following the merger. The urge for mergers (via ABR) represents the most significant and profound change facing the structure of Further Education, since the Further Education Act in 1992 (Hodgson, 2015; Hodgson and Spours, 2019a). England ranks bottom of the literacy table for the OECD countries, having three times more low-skilled young people than countries like Finland and Korea (Kuczera, Field and Windisch, 2016: 38). The problem is immense and needs an urgent solution.

The research in Further Education organisational culture is limited (Avis, Fisher and Thompson, 2014; Anderson and Cohen, 2015). The area of organisational culture in college mergers is also not well researched (Misite, 1994; Anderson, 2007). This study will contribute to the important field by providing key insights into organisational culture alignment during merger and how leadership management of change impacts staff emotional wellbeing and hence affects merger success. In the next section of this chapter, leadership of change will be explored.

## **2.5 Organisational Change Leadership**

Burnes, Hughes and By (2016) posit that organisational leadership and change go hand in hand, neither of them is meaningful without the other. The organisational change management literature report that it is complex, multifaceted and that most change initiatives fail. Kotter (1996) and over a decade later, Aiken and Keller (2009), reported that only 30% of all change management initiatives succeed. It is important to note however that the explanation for this level of failure rate was refuted by Hughes (2016), as he questioned the basis of the evidence. However, it is accepted that the level of failure rate is high which points to important aspects of learning and to challenge change management leadership theories that were/are promoted by business schools. The potential reasons for this high failure rate include implementation weaknesses, simplistic approaches to change leadership where leaders read the latest 'leadership of change' book, on 'how to' and then implement it without thinking about the complexity of bringing change about or that change

management theories might have not led to successful change management initiatives/practice rather than the implementation itself (Tourish and Hargie, 2004a).

This is in part due to many business schools not being research active and in part due to many leaders not having sufficient levels of insight to critique what they read. That is to say, it is not only the leadership and management individuals and teams that might have failed but also, and more likely, the theories promoted by business schools over the past three decades (Ghoshal, 2005). Pfeffer (2005) goes further by arguing that management schools have done more harm than good leadership practice. Naturally, it is worth pondering whether education leadership of change needs to be located within business schools or schools of education, or a hybrid of the two. These notions of change leadership are important in the case of mergers as examples of profound change leadership.

By, Burnes and Oswick (2012) argue for the need to shift attention to the notion of leadership away from the individual heroic leader. Rather there needs to be a more democratic and diffused notion of leadership as part of the culture of the organisation in the pursuit of delivering on a shared purpose. Leadership needs to be considered as a broad base, performed by a lot of people at all levels, totally focussed on making a difference, not by a few individuals at the top (By, Burnes and Oswick, 2011).

Also, the notions of followership and identity are key concepts, in the leadership debate (Burnes, Hughes and By, 2016). They argue that followership is about telling hard truths, the ability to challenge, to support others, and not being a servant who does not have an opinion but one that realises the benefit of purposeful conflict to achieve good sometimes.

However, the need for successful change management remains a key challenge across all sectors and in all domains (Hughes, 2016). Ford and Ford (2012) posit that there is insufficient research in change leadership which makes current evidence equivocal and incomplete. By, Hughes and Ford (2016) argue that the current subjective change leadership narrative has trapped professional practice for over three decades and unless we acknowledge this issue we will not be able to break away and start to re-learn leadership

and management. Amis, Slack and Hinings (2004), contend that contrary to popular thinking, significant change is messy, non-linear and hugely impacted by the pace of change. Hence the need for careful and detailed merger planning.

## **2.6 Leadership in FE**

The role of leadership, at all levels, is critically important in articulating purpose, providing stability and direction in any organisation during change such as merger (Young, 2009). Mergers represent a profound change and hence affect people deeply. Leaders, at all levels, need to develop their insights into people matters in ways that build their skills and abilities to plan and embark on a merger successfully, particularly the ability to self-pace and self-discover (Bruner, 2004). People matters are defined as the ways in which the emotional, wellbeing and recognition of professional expertise impact people's self-esteem and self-worth and hence affecting their professional practice considerably more than policies, procedures and compliance. Wolfe (2019) argues that middle leaders have a significant role to play in influencing the success of merger. She posits that middle leaders have two distinct roles: firstly, as the primary evaluators of change initiatives as they evolve and secondly, as key motivators of staff who report to them as they are in constant contact and are in positions of trust. Middle leaders can only achieve this, Wolfe (2019) argues, if they are trusted and feel valued, which required senior leaders to understand and enact valuing and trusting middle leaders. Irvine and Brundrett (2016) argue the need for a distinct development programme for skills acquisition for middle leaders, to enable them to both be effective and not to feel abandoned and neglected.

Wolfe (2019) also argued that middle leaders offer openness that is often reciprocated by staff and hence leads to an environment of loyalty and commitment. For this purpose, the support and development that middle leaders need to enable significant organisational change or merger to be successful needs to form part of the pre-merger preparation (Wolfe, 2019).

Irvine and Brundrett (2016) argue that middle leaders need to have a deep and engaged understanding of the vision for the future, time and space to reflect to enable them to support their staff and the ability to build trust and respect with their staff. These traits are

of significant importance considering the cultural reality of Further Education being dominated by fear and risk aversion (Thompson and Hopkins, 2019). They argue that continuing funding cuts and a policy framework of performativity and managerialism have led to forms of conformity to rules and disenfranchisement rather than welcoming professional debate.

To recap, Solvason and Elliott (2013) argue that FE research evidence is largely invisible, Orr (2009) argues that FE practice (including leadership and management) is driven by policy and Smith and O'Leary (2013) argue that performativity and managerialism negatively impact engagement and the professional identity of academics. This leads us to frame leadership and management literature with a policy lens and how policy is driven by the ideological neoliberal thinking that seems to have dominated FE policy since incorporation.

## **2.7 The Importance of Communication and Use of Language**

The acute importance of communication and the impact that language can have, in merger situations, or even broadly during organisational change, is well articulated in the literature (Angwin *et al.*, 2016; Steigenberger, 2016). Steigenberger (2016) argues that communication needs to be managed through the involvement of human resource management (HRM) professionals and that it needs detailed and thorough planning and management. However, it is important to be mindful of the need for authentic messages and not to be fake, as fake sentiments do more damage than good in initiating rumour, ambiguity, anxiety and mistrust. Williams, Roberts and Shires (2019) make the point that stress levels increase with uncertainty and ambiguity which can be resolved through transparent and authentic communication. Communication can be viewed as the glue that holds a merging organisation together (Angwin *et al.*, 2016). Weber, Rachman-Moore and Tarba (2012) argue that communication is the backbone of merger success.

It is important not to describe communication in broad terms such as 'effective' or 'open' but to be specific and detailed in what is expected from communication and how it is to be

achieved, although it is accepted that more communication is better than not enough (Angwin *et al.*, 2016). Angwin *et al.* argue that the richness of communication related to content, timing, mode and media, all contribute significantly to merger success. They further argue that pre-merger communication and post-merger communication are equally important. It follows that senior leaders need not only to have a detailed understanding of effective communication but also sufficient recognition of the areas of communication skills and expertise that might not be present within the organisation. These may need to be contracted from outside, in the same way as financial, asset and legal due diligence in merger. Lundqvist (2012) argues that rumour and gossip cannot be ignored by leadership teams, but need to be dealt with as they are a precursor for resistance and mistrust. She argues that to quash rumour is to establish trust, as without trust rumours become trusted.

Angwin *et al.* (2016) identified that rich, continuous and multi-channel communication can lead to successful merger integration and improved organisational commitment. They highlighted that when senior leaders view merger as a transactional process and only communicate with those whom are required to be informed to the extent that other employees only find out information through rumour or external press releases, they tend to fail in their merger integration processes. Tourish and Hargie (2004b) argue for open channels of communication even when sharing bad news, as this helps to keep engagement and morale higher than they would be otherwise.

## **2.8 Implication for People**

### **2.8.1 Introduction**

Galpin and Herndon (2014) argue that the most commonly referenced sources of merger failure are 'people' issues and issues related to organisational culture. They argue that it stands to reason that researchers should conduct due diligence analyses of these issues. More recently Williams, Roberts and Shires (2019) argue that when the merger is between dissimilar organisations, such as a thriving successful college and a weak failing college, merger progress can be associated with anxiety, stress, and damage to staff morale. They



also posit that an inordinate amount of time is spent on policy, structures and process with little time devoted to people matters. Cartwright and Cooper (1994) made the same point, some 25 years earlier. It seems that the point is still current and that the literature informing professional practice through evidence-based research is still lagging behind. However, this point is just as much, if not more, acutely needed to be taken critically seriously now because of the human cost associated with mergers and the prevalence of mergers in all sectors.

### **2.8.2 Staff Emotional Wellbeing during merger**

Williams, Roberts and Shires (2019) make an important point that when issues to do with culture are not dealt with and are left to fester, they lead to significant unproductive conflict and stress amongst staff. They argue that leadership teams need to focus on maintaining transparency of communication, engendering trust and other human matters not just on policies and procedures. Koi-Akrofi (2016) posits that the tension between organisational cultures during mergers pushes some individuals to act in ways that others do not see as right or fair, adding further to the emotional turmoil and resentment. This emotional upheaval leads to distrust which means staff will not be able to rely on managers doing the right thing. Page and Vella-Brodrick (2009) extended the notion of emotional wellbeing beyond individuals to organisations. They posit that organisational wellbeing is an important notion for leadership teams to contend with and is an extension of the individual wellbeing, which clarifies how and what needs to be done to enable organisational wellbeing to become an important agenda for leadership and HRM teams.

Page and Vella-Brodrick (2009) posit that wellbeing is linked to employee retention and employee performance and hence would have a direct impact on any organisation's financial standing and ability to compete. They also make an observation that employee emotional wellbeing is rarely measured methodically beyond an employee satisfaction survey. The importance of this point is in making employee wellbeing more acutely pronounced as a leadership concern.

Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006) in their seminal work on wellbeing concluded that emotional wellbeing can be improved through deliberate and methodical action. They make the point that autonomy, alignment of work and the achievement of goals to values, all contribute to a sense of empowerment and improved wellbeing and hence play a part in building trust in leadership. Therefore, this study will contribute to the FE literature on the ways in which emotional wellbeing can be improved through deliberate and methodical approaches during merger.

### **2.8.3 Trust in Leadership**

Trust is defined as a 'psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another' (Rousseau et al., 1998: 395). This state of vulnerability is critical for teams and individuals to experience and become comfortable with so that they can experience and build trust (Van Den Heuvel *et al.*, 2016). It follows that people in senior leadership positions might not have the answers for all issues and might not know how some structural changes and/or initiatives might work out. Critically, trust is built on an historical relationship with reciprocity of behaviours and positivity of intentions (Thundiyil *et al.*, 2015). Trust is also built through good communication as discussed in 2.7. It follows that a deeper insight in the behaviours, conduct and language used that lead to mistrust is necessary. It is the unintentionality of such behaviours that make them even more critical to understand. It is also important to note that trust is a dynamic state of being (Karhapää and Savolainen, 2018).

Donovan (2019) argues that a climate of performativity, control and managerialism is in essence a climate of mistrust as discussed earlier in section 2.2.1. It follows that there is almost a sense of normality about mistrust in FE, at least since incorporation, which has become more and more evident and pronounced over the years. One can only wonder, have leaders in FE contributed to the creation of this climate of mistrust or are they being subjected to it just like other practitioners in FE?

In a merger context, what is needed is to create opportunities for reciprocity and meaningful exchanges to enable trust to be built and nurtured. Karhapää and Savolainen (2018) argue that interaction and organisation-specific discursive practices of top management and the individual, group and organisation-level actions, will help build trust. Donovan (2019) argues a more nuanced point by stipulating the need for safe spaces for reflection and dialogue to enable trust building. It is also reported that to have a sense of fear, anxiety and uncertainty leads to low levels of trust in management (Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001). This study will contribute to the academic literature on trust in leadership during merger, as an organisational change case.

The literature has so far clarified the importance of people matters during merger and how leadership at all levels need to have the insight and confidence to focus on and enable the support of such matters. The importance of communication and the openness of decision making within the organisation are critical for building trust and safeguarding peoples' wellbeing. The methodology (Chapter 3) needs to approach the field study with an open mind to enable findings to be guided by participants and their experiences.

# Chapter 3 The Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on my journey along a path of discovery which until a few months prior to starting the research, did not feature in my many years of learning. It formed a central pillar of the way I viewed and reflected about the world in which I live. It follows that a qualitative approach is what is needed to answer the research question. The research question focuses on the perspectives of the impact of mergers on internal stakeholders; teachers, curriculum managers and leaders in GFEC. The journey started with the stance I took between the different philosophical approaches and I finalised that section by explaining why an interpretivist approach was the right approach to fulfil a project of this nature. I then discuss the approaches that were recommended by the academic community for research, applied in that case to qualitative research, to be trustworthy and rigorous; namely triangulation. Triangulation mitigated against my own bias and developed further my own reflexivity as the ability to being self-critical and aware of my positionality. I then discussed and described the approaches taken for triangulation in that project; method, participant and environmental. I then described and justified in the context of that research, the choice of case study methodology, choice of participant groups, moving on to describe the field research case (the two merged colleges). The chapter then moved on to describe the method of data collection and analysis followed by ethical considerations and an ethical dilemma which transpired during the data analysis stage.

The philosophical stance which I took was to be guided by what mattered to participants and not to pre-empt that by deciding what I should be asking about and what I expected them to comment on. My stance, as the researcher and as an experienced college Principal, was that the research stood to produce the best results if approached without preconceived ideas on what mattered and what did not, so that it was guided by the evidence as it developed. The methodology was directed to enable a thick and deep understanding of people matters; emotional wellbeing, trust and fragility during GFEC mergers.

### **3.2 The researcher's background, values and motivation**

I am an engineer by training and background, so my insight was fully in the physical science world, with no significance for meaning making by profession. In my years of training, dealing with people in a work setting was incidental as it was machines that were the primary objects of concern. My engineering assumptions trained me that people needed to be told what to do and then they would do as they were told; there was no meaning making, no multiple realities, no interpretations, no value-based reactions and no subjectivity, as everything in the work place was meant to be objective. With over two decades as a senior manager, in Further Education and in industry, I had experienced people and how they reacted or functioned. As a leader who was successful in a transactional and performative domain, I found that my own values had shifted over the years to the extent that I started to feel ashamed of some of what I had said and done a decade or more, earlier. This study helped me rediscover the human in me beyond what I had assumed I was meant to be when I started my management career some 20 years earlier. I had developed a deeper understanding of the tools and techniques that were at the disposal of social scientists and that underpinned management and leadership of change to make a success of any aspect of people management (Morgan and Morrison, 1999). Lived experiences were invaluable and offered a valid proposition for new learning and one needed this deep understanding to enable meaning making and to make a success of any organisation management of change, large or small (Smircich and Morgan, 1982).

The FE sector lacked voice, recognition and direction, amongst other things (Foster, 2005). One of the areas that FE was well advised to recognise and take forward was the need for articulating its case, and to have a voice on matters such as professional practice, regulation and policy. Key research strands for FE to create an evidence base to inform professional practice as stipulated by Solvason and Elliott (2013), to inform regulation as stipulated by Gleeson *et al.* (2015), and to inform policy by Orr (2009). Such work helped support FE's ability to have a pronounced voice on matters such as policy, regulation and practice. For research to be effective in informing FE's practice and voice it needed to involve practitioners at all levels in being practitioner researchers, subjects of research and field researchers (McCormick, 2001).

FE Colleges needed not only to be better plugged into research institutions, but to see colleges as part of the same continuum. Whether curriculum managers, assessors, lecturers, principals or governors – all should see research as an important part of any college's normal way of business. The need for an informed evidence base and the lack of evidence encouraged me to practice what I preached and to become a researcher, an insider researcher.

### **3.3 Philosophical Underpinnings**

One of the key considerations was what the most appropriate paradigm that enabled a full and well-rounded consideration of the research question took account of; the assumptions and the epistemology that were guiding the research. I started at the positivist stance as being appropriate, then moved to be against its underpinnings, moving towards being modernist, relativist, postmodernist and moving on to interpretivist (Pillow, 2003; Creswell, 2007; Jones, Bradbury and LeBoutillier, 2011). I knew that my thinking was not positivist when I was looking at this subject as I did not believe the answers could be found exclusively through quantitative research. The positivist approach considered reality to be there; it needed to be looked for and measured, it was value neutral (Sayer, 2010). The key tenet for a positivist approach was that reality was 'objective' and governed by measurable causal relationships. In a post positivist approach, reality was also out there but never fully explored and the researcher was to be as distant as possible from the field, and did not interact with it so that the objectivity of the findings were not affected by the researcher's values, attitudes, knowledge and assumptions (Sayer, 2010; Jones, Bradbury and LeBoutillier, 2011). This would be impossible for me as an experienced college Principal with considerable professional experience and vested interest in the subject, see discussions on reflexivity in section 3.4.1.

However, a positivist or a post-positivist approach would not answer the research question which I had posited. As this research acknowledged that people-matters could not be pre-set in a predictable and transactional manner, then it followed that a positivist/post-positivist approach would not work in this context (Bailey, Ford and Raelin, 2009).

People matters are more complex and hence I needed to involve myself in deep interactions to get to one of the truths. I found that my epistemological stance was guiding me towards being an interpretivist as I believed there was truth out there but it was subjective and I needed to immerse myself in the field, with participants, to get to it (Geertz, 1973). An interpretivist approach acknowledged that there was no one single truth but rather multiple truths (Jones, Bradbury and LeBoutillier, 2011). I also believed multiple realities coexist as functions of context, people's subjectivities and circumstances, hence impacting me and participants (Geertz, 1973). The interpretation would be impacted by my subjectivity, however I am not claiming that this was the only single truth (Geertz, 1973). Bryman and Bell (2014) argued that interpretivism enabled empathetic understanding of human action. In fact, in an interpretivist approach, subjectivity was acknowledged as part of the methodology to attempt to develop deeper understanding of the subject of research (Creswell, 2007) and was considered to enhance the findings by some academics (Peshkin, 1988). That aspect of subjectivity will be revisited later in 3.4.1.

Social constructivism was where I found my natural presence. I found that I was agreeable with the notion that participants' subjectivity shaped their reality and that there were multiple realities (Young, 2007). The constructivist paradigm was befitting as it enabled the issue that was being investigated to be explored from a variety of lenses (Yin, 2013). Yin posited that the constructivist paradigm enabled delving deep into the narratives, meaning making, lived experiences, differing perspectives to be understood from the individual members' point of view. The nuance to constructivism was that knowledge (epistemologically) was not only lived experiences of individuals but also the interactions between members.

The researcher acknowledged his own subjectivity and constructivist relativist ontological stance (Jackson, Drummond and Camara, 2007). It was relativist because the truth was constructed through interaction and experiences (Levers, 2013). The constructivist stance posited that human experiences and interactions form knowledge. Creswell (2007) acknowledges that Vygotsky was the father of social constructivism discourses as he believed in the power of interaction in meaning making. That aspect of knowing formed a central tenet to my ontological stance as I believed it is the interactions and experiences that my research attempted to make sense of and hence proposed ways of working in

merged colleges that would enable a new organisation to be born out of the two merged organisations. The implication was that I, the researcher, would impact that interaction, as I was part of the lived experience of the participants whilst they were making sense of their reality with respect to the research (Creswell, 2007).

The views from participants needed to reflect those participants' own perceptions and realities, the way they felt them and explained them to others; the ways in which policy impacted peoples' lives, their wellbeing and decision making. Also, participation in this research would have had an impact on each other and on other people within the institution. The researcher was part of these participants' reality, for this very short space of time while interacting to enable this deep insight (McEvoy and Richards, 2006). It was the co-creation of reality that played a central role in providing the deep insight that was being sought. It followed that the research was not only within an interpretivist but also constructivist paradigm (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). It is important to recognise that people did not react to emotional stimuli in a predictable, machine like, manner and hence there needed to be a deep and empathetic understanding of how people were affected by merger.

It followed that leadership teams and policy makers needed to be far more concerned by human matters in comparison to financial, performative and legal matters. It also followed that people who work in GFEC and those other key stakeholders, needed to have far more influence and control on policy than was currently the case. Further Education was in essence a sector in which people dealt and worked with other people, just like the rest of the education system, so people and social relationships mattered enormously.

I found Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism approach in challenging power structures and institutions appealing and convincing (Gaston and Maclachlan, 2011). This was because I have always taken the view that though I might subscribe to a certain world view, these views were not binary, truth did not reside in one or the other (Gaston and Maclachlan, 2011). It follows that there were truths present and my role, as a researcher, was to get to them and to enable participants to externalise their own thoughts, even if those thoughts were not at the forefront of the participants thinking before they engaged in the research, though they were naturally immersed in the merger experience. That was because those



thoughts were present even if not externalised which meant those thoughts impacted peoples' work, relationships, interactions and needed to be acknowledged and externalised to enable organisational culture to be understood and dealt with (Gaston and Maclachlan, 2011).

This was a journey of learning about philosophical discourses and discovery about myself; who I am, how and what guided my thinking and ultimately my decision making, values and beliefs. Part of the interest in this subject was my experiential knowledge and insight that people were not born managers or natural managers/leaders, but it was by skills and experiences that one learnt and honed to become a highly effective manager (Buchanan, 1974). This was an important aspect to learning and development in the professional practice of management as it drove learning, enquiry and experimentation as opposed to it being something that one was born with. It is immensely empowering, especially within a learning environment, that one could make a manager of themselves should they wish (Nahavandi, 2006; Allio, 2009).

This research was concerned with the lived experiences of leaders, managers and teachers including interactions within and between these groups and other stakeholders, as a typical merger is, then a case study approach befitted well, especially in bringing about the meaning of interactions between individuals and groups (Yin, 2013). This human side of merger was of critical importance for the future success and resilience of the merged institution. This study will contribute to the research gap as the field of research had not had significant interest in academic circles, especially by insider researchers. One of the key tenets of this study was to approach the research without preconceived ideas about reality. It was indeed interesting to interact with participants and join a journey of discovery with them (Sayer, 2010). The neoliberal managerialist approach to FEC policy treats teachers as education workers (Gleeson et al., 2015). The expression, 'being human' in this thesis refers to the way teachers are sometimes dehumanised by policy makers and leaders. Teachers are professional educators who are deeply concerned about their learners and hence adapt their practice and adopt ways to support their learners' not only on a technical level but also, and arguably more importantly, on a personal and emotional level. The management of teachers needs to acknowledge that a person has physical, emotional, affective, moral and civic needs, all of which contribute to the identity of a teacher. What is key is that being

human is to have the right to make decisions about the totality of your life, including your work setting and to contribute to the social experience of being part of a community that cares for you as an individual.

### **3.4 Researcher's Positionality and reflexivity**

There were, as far as practically possible, no preconceived perceptions that might have impacted any aspect of the research unduly. Gabriel (2018: 18) posited that the experience of the researcher, their identity and their practice, were intertwined and it was likely that the journey of discovery for the researcher lead them to a different outcome to the one originally intended. That was precisely my experience. The distance, in turn, afforded closer research findings to reality(s) through the researcher having a lot less of an impact on participants, the data collected and in time a much better informed analysis (Cresswell, Moizer and Lean, 2014).

My preconceptions for this study were shaped by a career spent working and successfully navigating performative, managerialist, transactional approach to management and leadership. So, a potential successful outcome from this study, would have been a transactional tool kit that guides principals and senior leaders on how to integrate the cultures of two merged colleges. However, my experiential position, as a longstanding college principal, was that people matters such as organisational culture cannot be successfully managed through systems, processes and compliance. The challenge is considerably more challenging and much more nuanced in that leadership teams need to have a level of trust and insight and work collaboratively with teams, across both institutions to achieve true cultural alignment.

The tension between my role as a college principal and that of researcher added further complications as participants naturally knew that I was a college principal though not at their college. Consequently, I needed to devise a data collection methodology that distanced me, as much as possible, and hence deploying NGT as part of the process.

Positively however, my position and experience of the sector enabled more frank discussions

and a level of analysis that has the potential for useful learning in informing the academic literature and in informing leadership professional practice.

### **3.4.1 Researcher's Reflexivity**

Peshkin (1988) argued that it was enriching for researchers to seek their own subjectivity and acknowledge it in their research. It was invaluable for Further Education research to be conducted by practitioners to enable deeper understanding of the issues and more informed research practice that had a better opportunity to reflect reality (Cresswell, Moizer and Lean, 2014). It was important to acknowledge that subjectivity and mitigate for it in the methodology of the research (Creswell, 2013). The researcher was well aware that his position, as a college Principal, might impact participants in some way which could affect their responses and even engagement in the process (Pillow, 2003). They might, for example, have felt as though they were being judged, which could skew their responses and inhibit honesty especially because the FE sector is constantly under scrutiny by Ofsted and other regulatory bodies (Creswell, 2013; Nestor and Schutt, 2018). The fact that the field of study was another college required ongoing introspection before, during and after each encounter (Pillow, 2003). This introspection, in the moment, enhanced the level of mindfulness and presence of the researcher in the activity and hence better level of meaningful analysis with continuous and ongoing questioning of the data and what it was saying (Pillow, 2003). I kept an ongoing diary of feelings, thoughts, potential meanings and possible implications for this study and for the sector as a whole. I found the diary useful, especially during the analysis and discussion stages and also for my own personal fulfilment.

I also found my diary instrumental in building a potential picture of an imagined world for FE in terms of the ways in which professional practice, policy and regulation could be differently constructed. The latter formed the central theme of a key note address which I gave at the ReimaginingFE\_2018 Conference held at Birmingham City University.

When considering researcher reflexivity, in agreement with Mahadevan (2012), it was important to acknowledge that the researcher did not subscribe to 'innocent reflexivity' when studying power relationships, as at the core of this study, a Principal interviewing teachers and middle managers. Gabriel (2018) posits that even the use of certain commonly used terms in framing questions can have negative or positive connotations which would impact participants. For that purpose, the researcher took several important steps to mitigate against his bias including piloting the study (Pillow, 2003).

### **3.5 Case Study Approach**

Taking stock of all that had been said earlier, it felt natural to be drawn to a case study method. That was because a case study enabled deeper introspection and delving into this merger to learn lessons and make recommendations from the learning (Baxter and Jack, 2008). These lessons will impact future mergers on many fronts including, but not limited to, GFEC practitioners, policy makers and potentially academics in informing further future research. It was worth noting that mergers lend themselves to case study methodology, for example, 112 case studies were documented on post-merger integration (Larsson and Finkelstein, 1999). Indeed many case studies have been conducted on specific mergers, for example the DaimlerChrysler merger (Badrtalej, J. & Bates, 2007) and in banking (Rhoades, 1998). In fact a seminal paper on case study methodology used mergers and acquisition to provide an in-depth guide to 'case study methodology' (Meyer, 2001).

The length of time case studies could take was challenging but necessary to enable delving deep into this college merger to understand how, in what way and why (Yin, 2013). It was acknowledged that case study methods do not lend themselves to generalisation but rather to learn from (Walsham, 1995; Cunningham, 1997). These weaknesses necessitated extra

care in articulating the research method, data collection, analysis and findings (Rowley, 2002).

Eisenhardt (1989) argued that case study research was useful at the primary stages of research for areas of research that had not been explored in depth to provide useful insights. Rowley (2002) however, challenges that view as a 'narrow perception' of case study research. She affirmed the suitability of case studies to enable in-depth learning about 'how' and 'why'.

The researcher also considered, in some depth, whether a single case study or a multiple case study approach would provide deeper and more informed findings. In the time available, a multi case study approach would have taken longer and provided more superficial data but less depth which would not have enabled answering the research question (Eisenhardt, 1989; Cunningham, 1997).

### **3.5.1 The Merger Scene and Planning Challenges**

Going through merger brings out vulnerabilities and anxieties for most staff and impacts many aspects of college life (Seo and Hill, 2005). All staff and especially leaders are particularly sensitive to how they and their organisation are being perceived during merger (Nicholson, 2008). College stability, effectiveness of merger management, staff perceptions and receptiveness to changes are all areas that inevitably mergers bring and play an important part in deciding whether to take part in such a study. It is critical for the Principal and the Chair to consider the impact on their staff (in both former institutions), how the various activities might impact current and/or future work on staff satisfaction, engagement, morale and such key organisational developments (Theron and Dodd, 2011). Will this project, during a particularly busy and sensitive time, get in the way of normal day to day activity, will it have negative consequences on participants (Cartwright and Cooper, 1993)?

Organisational psychology during merger plays havoc with staff morale and their sense of job security (Seo and Hill, 2005). Uncertainty about the future, potential redundancies, role

changes and similar anxieties lead many staff to be reticent from taking part in a study such as this. Staff might be worried about saying the 'wrong' thing, potentially landing themselves or others in trouble. All of this will play on people's minds when asked to consider participating in this research (Steigenberger, 2016). For these reasons the researcher needed considerable introspection and consideration in approaching participants to interest them to partake in the research (Creswell, 2013).

Prior to starting, I didn't expect to experience much difficulty in engaging a merged college and enlisting participants. As I delved deeper into the planning, scheduling and articulation of the study proposal and as I considered the ethical issues entangled within it, I began to see potential difficulties. These difficulties did not emanate from people not wanting to help but more from the pressures and sensitivities of mergers on people within colleges and whether participation in such research projects are deemed too much of a risk to agree to partake in (Seo and Hill, 2005). One of the many contributory factors of not partaking is GFEC staffs' insufficient insight into the potential benefits of research and being suspicious of the motives of researchers (Oreg and Berson, 2011).

### **3.6 Research Design**

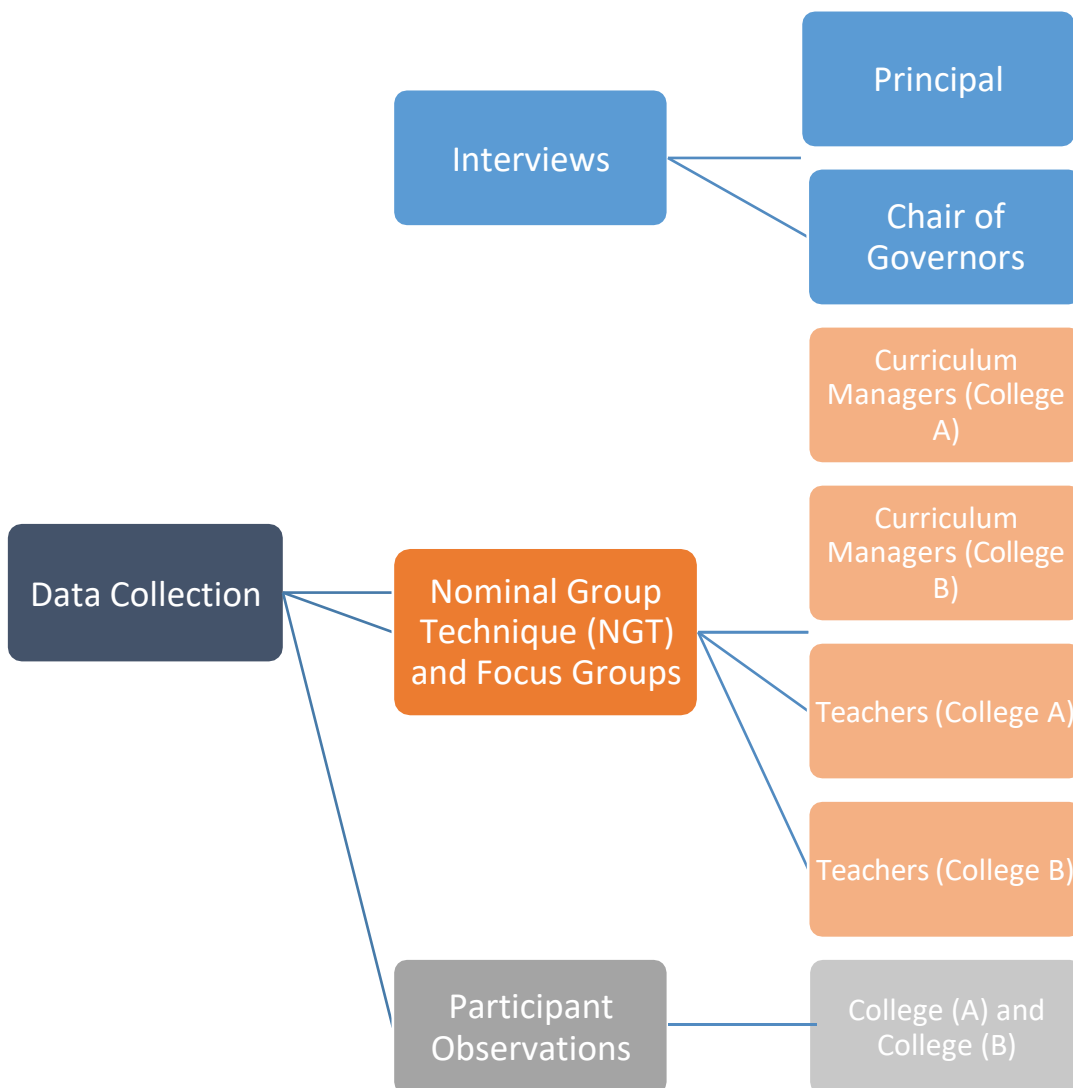
The research design was concerned with establishing answers to the Why and How of the research questions, see 1.2. The data collection, see

Figure 3.1, provides details of the interviews, see 3.7.1 and focus groups, see 3.7.2. All interviews and focus group sessions were recorded for transcription and analysis at a later stage. Ahead of entering the field, a pilot study was conducted to establish the appropriateness of research design, see 3.6.1. All communication with participants in Appendix 1.

As discussed in 3.3, the need to acknowledge my own impartiality, or lack of it, was imperative as it might influence the research outcome (McGarry, 2010). Researchers described three types of researcher bias; confirmation bias, question-order, leading and word choice bias (Mercer, 2007). For this reason, it was important to methodically mitigate

against these biases by identifying and deploying appropriate means such as Nominal Group Technique (NTG), see 3.7.2. Importantly, NTG helped mitigate against participant biases in the focus groups, namely acquiescence bias, social acceptability, habituation bias and/or sponsor bias (Shah, 2019). The pilot helped gauge the sequencing and the wording of questions to minimise my bias during the interviews with the Principal and Chair, see 3.6.1. The researcher had deployed the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) to initiate the focus group discussions to mitigate against biases; researcher and participant (Boddy, 2012).

Figure 3.1 Data Collection Diagram



Source: Hadawi, A. 2020

### **3.6.1 The Pilot Study**

The study was piloted initially to test the flow of questions including sensitivities, the completeness of the data collected through the question set and the researcher's ability to manage the interview. It was useful to pilot the study to assess the timings of questions, depth of answers and redundancy of questions when similar answers were given. One of the areas that transpired during the pilot stage was the need to ensure that the interviews and more importantly the focus groups did not seem to participants as rigid question and answer sessions but more of a free-flowing dialogue where the questions served to help focus the dialogue. For this purpose, the researcher reflected at the end of the pilot and introduced changes drawn from the learning, see 3.7.2.

### **3.6.2 Learning from the Pilot Study and Entering the Field**

The learning that was taken, in line with the literature, was that the key for a successful interview was a skilful interviewer who is in command of the brief and able to handle sensitive questioning (Gill *et al.*, 2008). The interview needed to be a free-flowing dialogue so that interviewees were not answering a series of questions. When interviews are handled well by the researcher, the interviewee would mentally move from the direct question/answer dynamic to a dialogue about the subject. This way, the interview would delve deep into the subject rather than being a mere shallow set of questions and responses. The interviewee would also be in a position to bring out points that might not have been on the radar of the researcher. Part of the essence of successful interviewing was for the interviewee to feel at ease and for their thoughts to flow without feeling as though they were being judged. It was critical for the researcher to make interviewees feel as though they were sharing their feelings, perceptions and thoughts, not responding to right or wrong type answers.

The pilot study was conducted with the Principal of another recently merged college, but not the field study so as to keep the field study as distant as possible until the data collection started.



The learning from the pilot study was centred on three strands to inform study planning and implementation. The first was focussed on ensuring that the wording and sequencing of interview questions achieved the following; answered the questions without gaps or duplication, enabled a natural flow in the conversation and not to be received as judgments rather than open inquisitive questions. The second strand focussed on refining the seed question for the NGT so that it could work for different groups of participants, namely teachers and managers from the two colleges. The third was to have a deep reflective discussion with the principal on sensitivities associated with this study and how the study might be received by another principal. The learning from the pilot resulted in revisions and amendments to the interview questions and the NGT seed question to enable the study to be conducted successfully.

The researcher also learnt not to be too pronounced or prominent in the dialogue, with as little intervention as possible. The researcher needed to be alert and focussed on the subject of the interview and to offer a little help in focussing the dialogue on the subject if need be but flexible enough to allow the dialogue to develop spontaneously.

The learning from the pilot ensured that at the beginning of the interviews and focus group meetings, the researcher took time to familiarise participants with him and the research. The intention was to achieve two key goals; participants feeling at ease with him and to start to see him as part of them, and the other was to give participants sufficient clarity on the subject and purpose to help reduce the need for him to interject during their focus group.

### **3.6.3 Describing the field study (Colleges A and B)**

The two colleges that formed the field of research merged in 2017 as part of the ABR which was initiated by the DfE in 2015 (DfE HM Government, 2015). To maintain anonymity, they will be called College A and College B. They were approximately 50 miles apart, in two different local authorities but in the same local enterprise partnership (LEP). College A had its main site in a town with one further specialist site in a rural area. College B had two sites in two different towns within the same local authority.

College A was rated good by Ofsted and had outstanding financial health. It was circa £30m in turnover. It had a stable governing body and senior management team. The Principal had been in this role for approximately 20 years. College B was in special measures which is a consequence of it being judged to be financially inadequate and its quality of provision was judged to be inadequate (grade 4) (Ofsted, 2016)<sup>1</sup>. Following their inadequate Ofsted inspection, the senior management team departed and an interim Principal was appointed to see through a merger, see Table 3.1 below for further details.

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<sup>1</sup> Full reference has been withheld to maintain confidentiality and anonymity

**Table 3.1 Colleges A, B and C context**

	College A	College B	Merged College C
Number of students (overall)	11,000	5,000	16,000
Turnover	£35m	£20m	£55m
Number of major campuses	3	2	5
Levels of qualifications offered	Entry - 6	Entry – 4	Entry – 6
Ofsted Inspection Grade	Good	Inadequate	
Financial Health	Outstanding	Inadequate	Outstanding
Financial Reserves	£12m (College A had significant financial reserves which position well to take on College B debts without destabilising College A's finances)	£0	£12m
Level of Debt	£2m	£18m (a significant level of debt in comparison to annual income)	£20m
Number of staff	750	450	>1200
Principal	Longstanding and permanent, highly successful with national recognition for effective leadership. At the time of this Study, the Principal had been in post for over 19 years.	Interim to see the merger through. The previous Principal had left the College following the college's inadequate Ofsted inspection a few months prior to this study.	Group CEO and Principal was former College A CEO and Principal
Chair of Board of Governors	Longstanding governors and Chair for four years prior to merger. Has been recognised by the FEC as a strong and effective Chair	Promoted to see merger through. Previous Chair had left the Board and the College following the college's inadequate Ofsted inspection a few months prior	Group Chair of Governors was former College A Chair
Board of Governors	Have been recognised by the FEC as a strong and effective Board	Have been judged by the FEC as a weak and ineffective Board	Former College A board with 3 additional board members from former College B

Source: Hadawi, A. 2020

The way the merger was conceived and managed needed to be viewed and understood within the specific contexts of the recent histories of the two colleges in the period leading to the merger. This was because the two colleges were in different internal states and different positions in terms of reputation, financial strength, Ofsted rating and leadership team stability and permanency. This difference in position influenced the level of control each of the two merging colleges had on the management of the merger process. The merger was conducted such that College A merged with College B, a type B merger, a merger of equals (BIS, 2015).

### **3.7 Data Collection**

Each session started by explaining the purpose of the session, how it was going to be conducted, and how the data was going to be handled, stored and analysed. The researcher took steps to ensure participants recognised the wider benefits of the research to GFEC in enhancing the experiences of staff during mergers.

Participant Observation (PO) was utilised to enrich the data collection and identify nuances and meanings. The researcher was making extensive, rich and comprehensive notes during interviews and focus groups. These notes enabled the researcher to analyse the field of study in a critical, rigorous and more informed manner (Kawulich, 2005).

Data collection was triangulated to strengthen the evidence base and also to mitigate against the researcher's own subjectivity, see section 3.8.2 and Figure 3.2 (Creswell, 2017). Detailed description of the data collection, instructions for participants and questions used can be found in Appendix 2.

### **3.7.1 Interviews**

The Principal and the Chair were interviewed individually. This enabled a better insight into what they perceived as the most important actions that they took to enable organisational cultural alignment (Chambliss and Schutt, 2018). The purpose for interviewing the Principal was twofold; staff generally look to their Principal at times of turbulence and change for direction and leadership, the second was that the Principal has a lot of scope to change and influence. The purpose for interviewing the Chair of Governors, in their role as the Principal's line manager, was to gain a detailed insight into the thinking of the Board of Governors, regarding the merger. Whether the Chair and the Principal were aligned in their thinking and whether the Principal was supported in their focus to merge the College. Whether the focus was on cultural alignment of the two colleges? Or was it more focused on assets, finances and legal issues, see appendix 3 Table d.

### **3.7.2 Nominal Group Technique (NGT) and Focus Groups**

There were four distinct groups, two for each of the merging colleges, of which one was for teachers and one for curriculum managers, utilising purposive sampling, see appendix 3 Table e and Table f. All groups followed the same pattern, starting with NGT session followed by theming responses and a focus group discussion, see Appendix 2. As part of the NGT, participants shared their written responses to the seed question amongst themselves. Participants then engaged in a theming exercise of points that were similar or overlapping. This process helped participants see the level of synergy, enabled reflection and engagement. This approach ensured that every participant in the group had an equal share in participation and that all thoughts had their share of discussion. It enabled a better assessment of the level of synergy in the thinking on the one hand and to mitigate against conformity within the group on the other hand (Gill *et al.*, 2008; Creswell, 2013). The process prevented the domination of the discussion by a single person or thought, encouraged all group members to participate, and resulted in a set of themes that represented the group's thinking (Van de Ven and Delbecq, 1972).

### 3.8 Rigour and trustworthiness: the role of triangulation in the study

The researcher took important steps to improve the rigour, reliability and trustworthiness of the study (Shenton, 2004). Shenton (2004), argued that Guba's (1981) constructs were widely accepted in this regard. These constructs also mitigated against my own bias.

**Table 3.2 Guba's Trustworthiness Constructs**

Term	Preference/Meaning
Credibility	Preference to internal validity
Transferability	Preference to external validity/generalisability
Dependability	Preference to reliability
Confirmability	Preference to objectivity

Source: (Guba, 1981)

#### 3.8.1 Types of triangulation

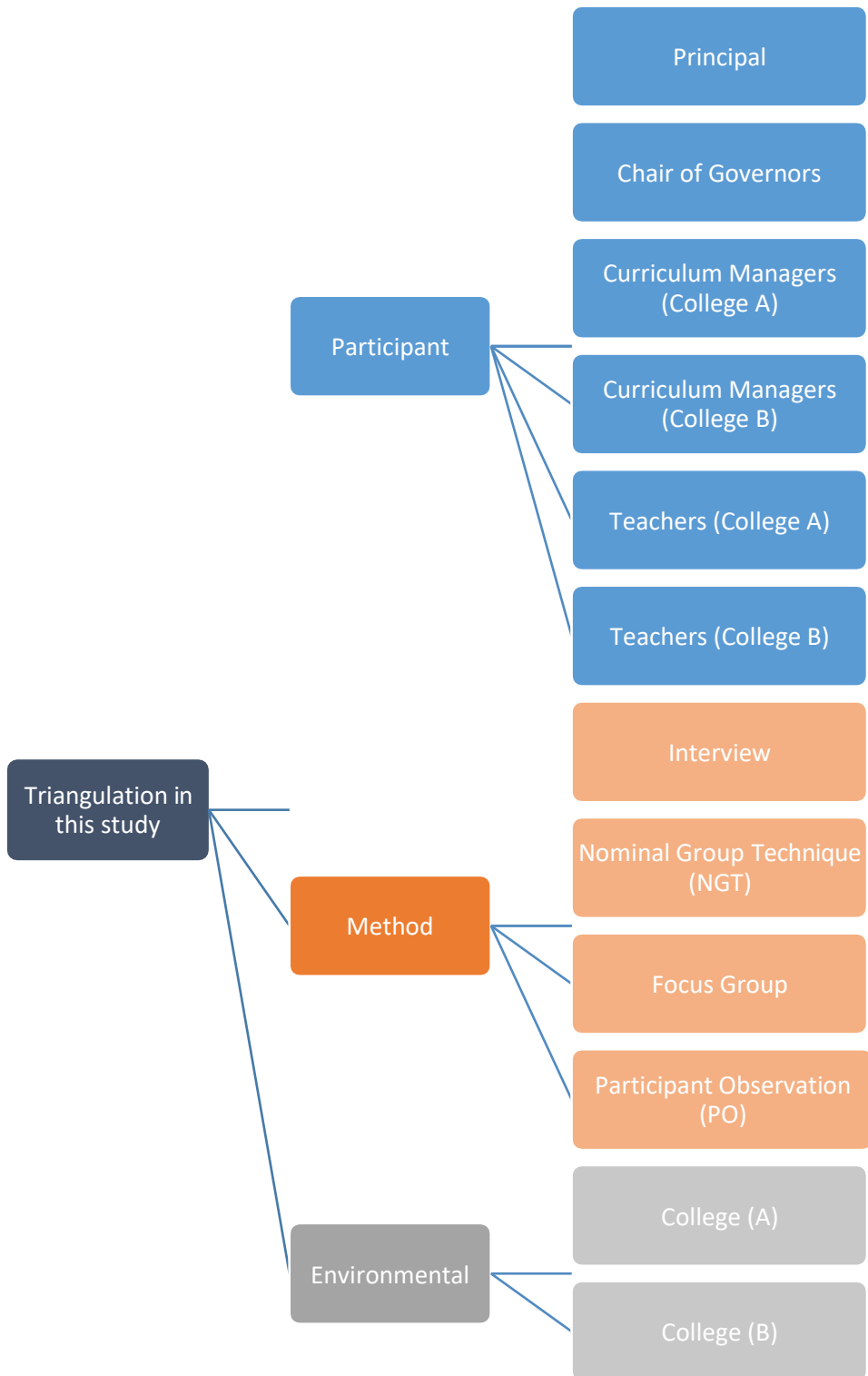
Denzin (2012) postulated that there were five different types of triangulation; data collection, researcher/investigator, theoretical, methodological and environmental. He posited that any combination of the aforementioned triangulations provided opportunities to enhance trustworthiness, rigour and dependability of findings. It was further stipulated that triangulation not only increased confidence in findings of the research but also provided opportunities for creative ways to consider the data from different perspectives which otherwise might not have been considered (Mathison, 1988).

### **3.8.2 Triangulation in this research**

Using triangulation, see Figure 3.2, as a central pillar of the methodology in this research was critical. It helped mitigate against the researcher's own bias as it was relatively easy for the researcher, as an experienced and long-standing college Principal, to look for confirmation of his own long held views about college mergers and organisational culture. That risk needed to be mitigated against methodologically as well as ensuring that there was ongoing introspection and re-examination of the data. That enables objective subjectivity, which is found somewhere on the objective/subjectivity continuum (Navickas, 1976; Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Objective subjectivity is where one is aware and acknowledges their subjectivity but works through a rigorous and methodical framework to collect and analyse data to determine findings and recommendations.

In this research, triangulation was utilised in three domains: participants, method and environmental, see Figure 3.2. Participant triangulation helped to enrich the data and the perspectives it provided as it delved deep in exploring the lived experiences of participants who had gone through the same merger experience but in their own ways. It also enabled both individual perspectives, through the interviews and NTGs and group perspectives, through the focus groups. The method triangulation enabled diverse and rich data to be collected. The environmental triangulation enabled College A and College B voices and perspectives to be authentically represented (Mathison, 1988).

**Figure 3.2 Triangulation in this Study**



Source: Hadawi, A. 2020



### 3.9 Ethical Considerations

There was a moral imperative for conducting ethical research (Alexander, 2014). One of the key tenets of ethical research is informed consent, in line with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines, it was attained through clarifying the purpose and goals of the research as well as clearing any misconceptions potential participants might have had about the research. It was also important, as discussed earlier in 3.7 and detailed in Appendix 4, for participants to trust all aspects of data handling especially confidentiality and anonymity (Creswell, 2013). The researcher was clear from the outset on the need to establish a level of trust with the participants as it was a crucial element of informed consent (Alexander, 2014). This trust helped ensure that the consent and engagement were meaningful and hence the data collected from the various strands of the process was authentic and perceptive (Tracy, 2010). Flory and Emanuel (2004) posited the need for meaningful consent which was broader than the 'consent form' and included engagement with participants to ensure understanding, trust in the process and hence more persuasive and authentic outcomes.

Flory and Emanuel (2004) identified three key criteria for informed consent to be authentic and meaningful, which are:

- Participants' mental capacity to discern the benefits and risks of the research and decide for themselves whether to participate or not, (competency to judge).
- Participants being informed about the full truth of all aspects pertaining to the research and their potential involvement, (no concealment).
- Participants are free to consent, (no coercion).

One of the ethical issues that was implicit to this research was the power relationship between researcher and participants, mainly due to the researcher being a college Principal, though a different one (Mercer, 2007). For this reason, the researcher took time to explain every aspect of the process in the way would-be participants needed it, with plenty of opportunity for them to ask, clarify, challenge and potentially change their minds, to withdraw consent and to help build trust, see Appendix 4. The researcher also dealt with questions and concerns from participants about the purpose of the research, the participants' anonymity, openly and sensitively ahead of each session to build rapport with participants.

### **3.9.1 An ethical dilemma**

An ethical dilemma emerged during the early stages of the data analysis as reporting the findings would make preserving group anonymity challenging. The issue was that some participants, in their groupings, might be disadvantaged through being identifiable through some of the findings of the research (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 1994). This issue required further careful consideration and treatment so as not to disadvantage participants. The concern was that group identification might harm participants' welfare, job security or indeed promotion opportunities in the future. It might also affect relationships between groups of staff in the college as a direct or indirect consequence of this research. For this reason, it was considered more appropriate not to go ahead with respondent validation, as participants must not be harmed (Mercer, 2007). This issue required deeper introspection during the analysis phase to ensure authenticity of findings. Bhatta (2013) argued that researchers should conduct preliminary studies to mitigate against such ethical dilemmas, however, this issue did not arise during the pilot study. It is important to note that all participants were satisfied about the steps taken to safeguard and protect their identities and their individual contributions as part of the informed consent process.

# **Chapter 4 Findings Part (1); Leadership, Merger**

## **Process and Communication**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This study sought to fulfil two main aims. The first was to develop a detailed understanding of lived experiences of internal stakeholders with respect to GFEC organisational culture integration and the second was to decipher what drives professional practice in GFEC mergers. The findings in this chapter helped develop a meaningful understanding of perceptions and actions of teachers, middle managers and leaders about organisational change in terms of aligning organisational culture when two English Further Education (FE) colleges merge.

The findings have been drawn from analysis of data collected from interviews, focus groups, nominal group techniques and participant observations. The information included participants at three levels; senior leaders (the Chair of Governors and the Principal and CEO), curriculum (middle) managers and teachers at the former Colleges A & B. The data analysis was carried out in four phases, the first phase being an inductive process, themes emerging from the data in an exploratory manner (Clarke and Braun, 2017). The second, third and fourth phases were synthesised, involving combining key themes and sub themes to create broad meaningful narratives that described the essence of what participants were trying to say, even if not directly (Clarke and Braun, 2017). Inductive coding was powerful as it was driven by the research data. Detailed tables showing the outcome from the phases can be found in Appendix 5, Appendix 6 Table Phase 2 Analysis Data, Appendix 7 Table Phase 3 Analysis Data and Appendix 8 Table Phase 4 Final Four Broad Themes. However, one needed to be mindful that it took longer to analyse in this way, noting that the researcher went through a methodical synthesis process to form a comprehensive insight from the data (Clarke and Braun, 2017). The thematic analysis produced an insightful and convincing set of themes which reflected the appropriateness of the method to answer the research question.

The period during which data was collected for this research was seven to nine months into the merger and the timing of this research was of critical importance to the data that was collected as it reflected feelings, emotions and the 'state of being' for participants at that point in time (Cartwright and Cooper, 2014). It is entirely possible that the same study if conducted two years into the merger might produce a different set of findings.

Table 3.1, provided a snapshot of the two former merged colleges, to enable the reader to build an insight, though limited, into the circumstances that the two colleges were experiencing just before they merged. As detailed in 2.2.3, the former Minister for Further and Higher Education, Rt Hon Nick Boles MP (Boles, 2015), launched the ABR to create larger, more resilient colleges. In this context the former minister referred to resilience as a financial consideration which is important but it is not the only measure of resilience of any institution. People matters, resilience of teachers and managers are of equal if not more importance to the future stability and prosperity of institutions (Khan *et al.*, 2017). This study focusses on teacher and manager wellbeing and trust in leadership. Zucollo (2020) reported that the English GFEC has the highest levels of anxiety amongst educators and that lecturers stand out as having the lowest levels of wellbeing. It follows that a deep and detailed study of GFEC lecturers and leaders' wellbeing is of critical importance if we are to avert a potential total system failure.

Findings from the Chair of Governors interview were aligned with the findings from the Principal's interview. Whilst it is expected that the Chair and the Principal be fully aligned in their thinking and vision for the merger, it is not always the case. For example, see quotes below.

'I became the joint Chair of the combined Governor group...'

'I think they [college B] could see a lot of benefits whereas I don't think that [college A], could actually see anything to begin with apart from we're taking over a poorly performing college and that can't help but drag us down...'

'As I said the key challenges was very much different perceptions of Governors. We've got some really good governors in [college A]. They're forensic in the way they look at things, .... and I was disappointed at the quality of the governors at [college B].'

'The organisational culture of the other college [B], well I was just depressed every time I went across there, it was some very, very hard-working individuals, really hard working but for what purpose, I don't think they had any idea about what they were trying to do.'

'when I first met the new chair of [college B] she said the one thing I refuse to accept that you are taking us over and I said well you might like to say that but in all effect it is whether you like it or not but it has got to be seen as a merger and I think at the end that

was the case. '

'... we interviewed all the Governors again for the new body, some of the ones that we had already in our own organisation [college A] obviously we weren't going to change that but anybody who wanted to join the Board of the new combined organisation from [college B] we interviewed. So, I interviewed about 5 or 6 that came in through [college B] and properly interviewed you know, proper questions and assessed everywhere...., we needed certain types of individuals and that I think gave a very, very good feel to the Governors from [college B], that were, well they were successful'

The findings are in two chapters to aid clarity and accessibility. Chapter Four describes the analysis phases as well as reporting broad themed findings such as merger processes, leadership and control, management structures, functional and transactional matters and communication. The need to reflect was equally pronounced but as it is a methodological finding, it was decided to separate it in its own section at the end of this chapter. Then Chapter Five describes findings that relate to 'people matters', such as emotional wellbeing and trust in leadership.

## 4.2 Thematic Analysis (Phase 1)

The analysis started in an informal yet deeply reflective iterative process of listening to the audio recordings and re-listening to sections and parts of discussions to help give depth to understanding what was being said. This process also took place during the transcription phase. This was an important aspect to the analysis which helped inform what seemed to emerge as themes from this study. The theming process initially started with phase 1 by going through the transcribed text and codifying it by creating nodes in Nvivo®. Phase 1 continued until the whole of the data set was coded. Phase 2 followed by revisiting the nodes and their meaning by reflecting on the text that was associated with each node. This was done to fine tune code names and look for opportunities of combining codes to help improve meaning making. Phases, 3, 4 and 5 were an iterative process of revisiting nodes, reflecting deeply on the points that were being made by participants and looking for opportunities for further combining of nodes to refine and enhance meaning making. I also kept a reflective diary, on Nvivo®, of what thoughts I was having whilst I was analysing. The themes were inevitably informed by the literature review as the reading must have had an influence on me and hence on some of the emerging themes. However, the listening to the recording and the reading of the transcriptions have had a much more profound impact on the emerging themes especially notions of reflection, trust and fragility for example. This aforementioned process was critically important but not methodical nor formalised as part of phase 1 and it could be seen as initial ground-work for phase 1.

Phase 1 revealed that some nodes kept reappearing, such as reflection and communication for example, whilst more specific nodes, such as 'pre-merger planning', appeared less often, see Appendix 5. It was important to note that the frequency of mention did not necessarily equate to importance, so a node might appear a handful of times but it might have a profound impact on the findings and would be critically important for future recommendations. Frequency of course was important as it reflected participants' feelings, emotions and what was foremost on their minds during the data collection phase, but it cannot be the only measure that was considered in forming the findings of this research. This was as a consequence of the nature of the research question of this study, in that they were not about gut feelings and initial reactions to questions but more about experiences and feelings which inevitably involved reflective thinking and peer discussions. It was also important to note that what mattered most was the authentic voice of participants as

opposed to the popularity of their views.

The focus group discussions were based around the themes which were created by was a methodological finding, as it only came about because of the nature of the method, and might not have become evident had a different method been deployed. It is described in detail towards the end of this chapter.

### **4.3 Thematic Analysis (Phases 2, 3 & 4)**

Phases 2 and 3, see Appendix 6 Table Phase 2 Analysis Data and Appendix 7 Table Phase 3 Analysis Data respectively, followed methodical and iterative processes of synthesis, where similar or closely related themes were merged to aid clarity and improve understanding. This process of synthesis was related to the initial meaning that was attached to each node but might have been nuanced slightly differently to help ensure that the voice of participants was being authentically conveyed at that stage of the analysis. As the analysis progressed further, deeper meaning making meant that there was a need to follow an iterative process of delving deeper and deeper and merging themes were necessary. The meaning making made it necessary to revisit the data more than once. For example, the themes of communication, internal communication, external communication and use of language were combined as they all reflect one broader theme in response to the research question on developing a deep understanding of the actions to align organisational culture during merger. These nodes were nuanced differently and could, in response to different studies that are more concerned with communication or language or communication before and after merger, be treated separately. However, in the context of this study, they could legitimately be combined to aid clarity and to aid simplicity. This study is concerned with leadership action in aligning organisational culture during merger, which related to how the leaders communicated but was not focused on communication in its own right. Appendix 7 Table Phase 3 Analysis Data, shows the outcome of phase 3 that produced 6 broad themes.

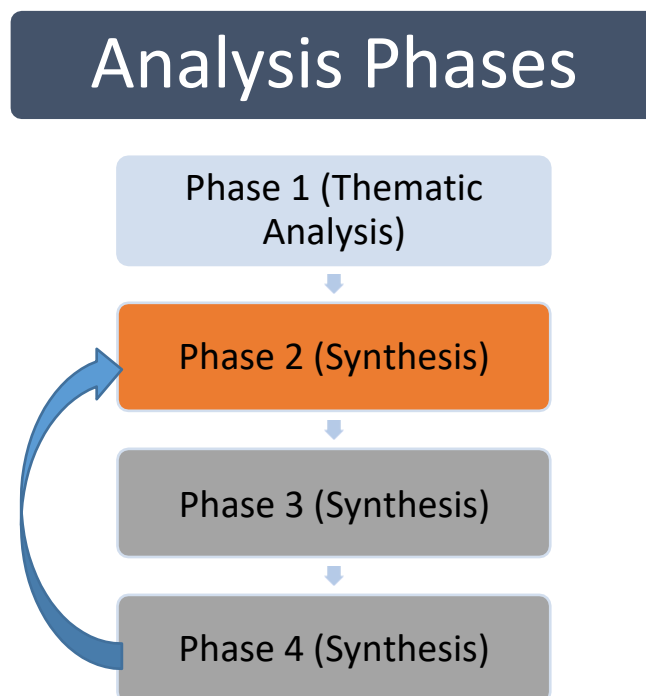
Phase 4, see Appendix 8 Table Phase 4 Final Four Broad Themes, was to assign a label to

each of the 'broad themes', which reflects the broader meaning that was identified during phase 2 (Clarke and Braun, 2017). The broad synthesised themes, in order of prevalence, were emotional wellbeing, power & control, functional & operational matters and finally communication including language.



All of the aforementioned 'broad themes' were reflected in the academic literature. Communication as an important determinant for the potential success of merger was well articulated in the literature (Giessner *et al.*, 2006; Giessner, Ullrich and van Dick, 2012). However, emotional wellbeing was not as well researched in terms of prevalence and importance until recently. Sarala, Vaara and Junni, (2017) suggest that one of the key avenues for further future exploration in mergers is a more 'fine-grained' understanding of the 'human side' which requires conceptualizing mergers as practice-oriented processes. They further suggest that emotional processes, participation and change agency, amongst others, need deeper and more refined understanding. This study will help deepen this understanding and will be explored more deeply in the discussion chapter (6).

**Figure 4.1 Analysis Process**



Key:

- |                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| Phase 1 resulted in | Appendix   |
| Phase 2 resulted in | Appendix 6 Table Phase 2 Analysis Data           |
| Phase 3 resulted in | Appendix 7 Table Phase 3 Analysis Data           |
| Phase 4 resulted in | Appendix 8 Table Phase 4 Final Four Broad Themes |

## 4.4 Key Broad Themes and Chapter Structure

The findings of this study need to be understood in the context of the way the merger was conceived and managed and consequently, the way participants reflected their emotions and lived experiences. To preserve participants' anonymity, they were coded as 'T' for teacher, 'M' for manager, 'CA' for College A and 'CB' for College B, see Table 4.1. The number in a code represents the individual participant, for example T3CA teacher number 3 College A.

**Table 4.1 Participant Label Code**

Participant Role	Code	Examples
Teacher	T	T1CA Teacher 1 from College A, T3CB Teacher 3 from College B
Manager	M	M1CB Manager 1 from College B, M3CA Manager 3 from College A
College A	CA	
College B	CB	
Number	1, 2, 3,...	To differentiate the various participants within a focus group

Participants' introspection was clearly affected by the way the merger was implemented, one teacher from former College A reflected on how it must have felt for former College B staff, admittedly an assumption, see below.

'Probably skewed to the (College A) model...my guess is if you are working at (College B), it just feels like an invasion'. T3CA

The aforementioned quote, summed up how it must have felt for former College B staff and also how former College A staff felt about the merger. In the next section, the four key broad themes listed above will be described together with quotes from participants to help illustrate the essence of each theme.

The key broad themes emerged as phases 1 to 4 of the analysis evolved in an iterative, deeply reflective and progressively more refined manner. These themes reflect the emotions and lived experiences of staff in both former colleges during the time of the data collection. These lived experiences helped provide clarity on how the actions of the leadership team impacted participants and consequently providing answers to the research question. Most profoundly, the participating teachers and middle managers had two clear strands that were

consistently present throughout the focus groups' discussions. The first was the emotional impact on them and their own wellbeing, whilst the second was their need to engage in reflection as part of their mental wellbeing. For this reason, and to ensure that the findings reflect not only the content but also the spirit of what participants reported, it was decided to separate the findings into two chapters.

1. Leadership, power & control
2. Functional / Operational / Management Structure
3. Communication and use of language
4. Emotional wellbeing – Chapter 5

## **4.5 Leadership, Power & Control**

Power, control and leadership are closely related, in the context of this thesis, and are grouped together as they all pertain to culture that is specifically focussed on the practice of the Principal and how that impacts staff. Aspects of leadership, power and control are highly relevant to organisational success. It is important to acknowledge that aspects of people matters in any role are considerably more important than technical, operational and knowledge aspects (Pfeffer, 1992). Therefore mastering power dynamics is central to organisational success (Ganta and Manukonda, 2014).

It was important that leaders understand and have the ability to navigate power dynamics within their organisations, so that aspects such as trust and followership impact organisational culture positively. Followership and trust manifest themselves in the quote below from T4CB. It was clear that these participants were exhibiting traits of alienated followers, see below.

'Sometimes it feels like he (Principal) tells he's telling one College something different from the other to get a response or to make some kind of competition between the two'. T4CB

It appears there was an implicit expectation of authenticity of communication, transparency and consistency from the Principal so that both sides of the newly merged college did not

compete but rather collaborate. This alienation extends to managers from former College B too, see quote below.

'Got that the overall approach seems to be very pre-determined, any consultation does seem to be quite a token gesture'. M2CB

This gives clarity to the notion that staff, in this case, M2CB, would have appreciated having real and meaningful consultation on decisions which affected them and their staff. In essence, teachers and managers from former College B were asking for authentic leadership behaviours when communicating, making decisions and consulting with them.

Leadership is critically important to creating a unified work culture; what is created, what is tolerated and how values are driven. Power and control are important in having clarity on what will be controlled and what leaders will be flexible about. In this context, the Principal was clear on what was negotiable and what wasn't; see the following quote.

'...the three things we said that were almost not negotiable for us were the (College A) approach to Finance, to Marketing and to Quality would be adopted wholesale ....' Principal

The Principal was clear that he communicated with authenticity, openness and clarity. However, managers from College B seemed to think that whatever it was, the College A way was going to prevail. This contrasts with authentic and meaningful consultation and decision making. That is not to say it wasn't right not to negotiate on College A's approach to 'Finance', 'Marketing' and to 'Quality' but it means that for staff to buy into these decisions, they needed to be convinced through an investment in time, and thought to articulate why this decision would be right for the whole college in the long term, not just because it was the College A way. It was decided and communicated in such a way that it sounded like a take-over and was certainly interpreted as such by staff from College B and some from College A, as evidenced earlier.

It can be seen that there was no trust in decision making nor in the authenticity of reasons given. Aspects of trust, discussed in 5.2.2 and aspects of authenticity in leaders are of critical importance in followership. The interrelatedness of trust, authenticity, leadership, power and control and how they impact emotional wellbeing were emerging as central themes that ran through this study.

Transparency induces trust and hence followership and that was why transparency matters in helping to eliminate suspicion (perceived or real). However, this transparency and authenticity need to be managed sensitively and intelligently. So for example, it is acknowledged that high performing teams are able to tell hard truths (Burnes, Hughes and By, 2016). However, they need to be considerate of the language, tone, forum, setting that will influence the success or failure of 'telling hard truths', more on this aspect in the discussion on 'Communication and Language', section 4.5.2. It is also important to note that leaders need to be able to receive 'hard truths' not just give out these 'hard truths' to others (Burnes, Hughes and By, 2016). The quotes below from College B managers and teachers reflect a slightly different reality, see below.

'There appears to be no evidence that the Principal has attempted to align cultures'  
T4CB

'There appears to be different cultures within (College A) and (College B), ...' T2CB

'They have stressed it is not a 'them and us' culture but there has been too much comparison which can only be seen as them and us.' T5CB

These quotes demonstrate that these participants were willing and able to speak truth to power. However, speaking truth to power requires leaders to create the right environment for staff to feel safe and believe in this truth being listened to and acted upon, otherwise it would be pointless and leads to division and alienation. It seems highly perceptive of T5CB that leaders are saying one thing (no them and us) but doing another; comparisons, encouraging a culture of competition and using statistics. It is revealing that the cultural differences were in the consciousness of leaders hence the term 'stressed'. For culture to be in the consciousness of leaders is a positive aspect to leadership. However, leaders needed to have been careful of their actions and what they said, it is not simply hollow words, actions speak louder as was clearly the case in the aforementioned exchange. The quote below serves a good reminder of how little trust there was from College B teachers in the Principal, fuller discussion in section 5.2.2, see below.

'Did you see those asking complicated questions at the last presentation had their photos taken?' T3CB

The above quote seems to suggest that these teachers didn't feel safe to speak truth to power, this might stifle debate which the College might need to help it identify issues and resolve them.

'A culture of competition has emerged through statistics being misrepresented in staff meetings.' T1CB

College leaders needed to be breaking down barriers and bringing about unity of purpose rather than emphasising the sense of difference and promoting competition.

Interestingly, the perspective of what participating teachers argue as their priority and what the Principal argues as his priority seem aligned on the surface but neither agreed with it. T4CB comment, below, seems clear that learners were their main priority, which was also the priority of the Principal as per the quote earlier in this chapter, yet the teacher seems to suggest that learners were not the priority in the newly formed college and there was more focus on ticking boxes, see below.

'I just really fear that the focus is being detracted from what we are teaching to how we as teachers are managed and how...it's not what we do in the classroom that seems to count, it seems to be every other box that we need to tick and form that we need to fill in and things like that and data we need to pull, that the data doesn't match on this system to that system and the emphasis just doesn't seem to be on...' T4CB

'That's where it's going isn't it, absolutely?' T2CB

Note that T2CB agrees 'absolutely', yet there is a nuance here, in that the new systems and procedure hadn't been explained and agreed upon sufficiently for teachers, in this example, to buy into them as key contributors to the students' success and progress. The paradox here might reflect a different paradigm for the focus on 'students', on the one hand some consider learners as people and on the other some consider them as consumers and while they both want the best for the learner, the value each has is different, the clash of cultures might be much deeper and well-grounded in the current times of neoliberal marketisation ideology.

The aforementioned exchange raises two key points; the first is that it wasn't sufficient to say that we are focussed on students, it needed to delve deep into what that meant and the second, was that all new systems and procedures need to be afforded sufficient time and

thought to articulate a rationale consistent with the mission and values that staff are able to trust and comply with.

Alternatively, there were on the other hand experiences of successful integration such as T5CB, who worked in a different department from everybody that's spoken so far, see below.

'And I've clearly had, in regards to the culture and the merger, I've clearly had benefits that you probably haven't had so I have got now a new manager who is from (College A) who has embraced us and is learning from us and also bringing in you know the bits from (College A) so... sharing good practice between both. I've had a very successful merger. (my manager) has taken the time to organise us to go down and meet her old team as it was who were really nice people, who showed us around, you know and that alone I feel has stopped lots of barriers .... So I think that was probably the magic wand that perhaps we all could've done with.' T5CB

Note the 'magic wand', about stopping barriers (forming), the nuance here is that there seems to be clear evidence of effective leader/follower relationship and a focus on human matters.

#### **4.5.1 Functional & Operational Merger Management**

Matters relating to functional and operational, management structure, timing and pace of merger are central to driving the merger process to its natural conclusion. For policy makers, regulators and funders, it seems, these aspects are the most pertinent. Merger guidance (AoC, 2017) stipulates specific deliverables and metrics for legal, assets and financial matters including characteristics of the due diligence that needs to be completed. However culture only got a passing mention with no stipulation of what to do about it (AoC, 2017). Consequently, principals and governors spend most of their merger planning on the aforementioned as per the guidance. The merger was conducted successfully in that it was enacted on the said date as planned with all the structures in place. The ESFA reported to the author that this merger was exemplary in how smoothly it had been conducted and concluded. It is intuitive for leaders to want to organise structures and plan the merger pace and timing; essentially all aspects that can relatively easily be managed rather than complex constructs such as culture. The Principal was clear, during the interview, that matters of

structure of the new College needed to be resolved quickly and shared with the whole College as soon as possible, see quotes below.

'.....we decided the two big things we have to do straight away, was one, we have to get organisational clarity. So these are the people in charge of the new organisation,...and to do that very, very quickly, almost for the first staff meeting in September...' Principal

'.. we didn't just take the decision at the outset, we checked along the way and culture was a big part of that...' Principal

One can deduce useful insights from these quotes. The first is that it seems that there was little consultation or involvement with College B managers, or staff in general, as many of the decisions were made ahead of the merger. All staff were invited to campus-based briefings by the Principal so they could be updated on the situation and be presented with the new structure with all the newly appointed managers and senior managers appointed. The second point was the urgency for the Principal to deliver the structure at the first meeting with staff, which might indicate that staff were not taken on the journey to arrive at these decisions. The journey or the process that lead to these decisions, see quote below, is just as important as the decisions themselves as people buy into the outcomes better, the alternative risks alienating staff rather than giving them stability and clarity (Scrivener, 2014). For staff to have the opportunity to voice their concerns and receive answers which may well deal with their concerns sufficiently appropriately is an important part of alignment of values and goals (Ganta and Manukonda, 2014). The third, the second quote above reflects a superficial or simplistic view of checking the pulse for culture. And fourth, the point related to having clear and authentic communication which was discussed in section 4.5.2. These quotes serve to highlight the dissonance between leadership theory and practice.

The process for creating the new organisational structure needed to recognise professional expertise and organisational knowledge from College B managers as well as former College A managers, see below.

'.....it was clear from the outset, we weren't going to get a look in for the director posts...'.  
M1CB

It would be a natural concern for leaders to stick with the people they know, their existing Directors at former College A. However, this was being done at the expense of building trust and creating a unified college. One way to mitigate against risks in such situations would



have been to have a robust and multi-faceted selection process for the new roles. In this way, most people will trust the new appointments even if they did not like the outcome (Bryson, 2003).

The issue for the new structure being presented as ready would have been too difficult for staff to react to it, there was too much to make sense of, especially when one considers their fragility and staff low emotional wellbeing. Staff fragility and emotional wellbeing, reported in detail in 5.2.2 were highlighted by both M1CB and M3CB, see exchange below.

'... is that Principal ignored staff emotional well-being and fragility at a difficult time'. M1CB

'Yeah absolutely and that's ... staff fragility and wellbeing was that motivation and morale is at rock bottom and seems to get lower every week and that's resulted in people leaving...' M3CB

Note that morale gets lower every week and that as a result staff were leaving. It is noteworthy that this study was taking place nine months into the merger, so it would be right to deduce that not building trust and to slot people into the new structure had caused considerable anxiety and lack of trust in the leadership of the organisation. Organisation structures work best when staff integrate and own them; it seems that there was no real integration at the point in which the study was being conducted. M2CB, made a nuanced point about structure fairness, see below.

'.....look at the structure and having a fair split of staff that understand the whole organisation...' M2CB

The point being that when most of the managers in the newly formed college came from the former College A and then, by implication in M2CB's view, this new management team will have a skewed view of the organisation as they know former College A but not so much former College B. This might also have implications for the kind of assumptions a manager makes about their institution, which might have a direct impact on the kind of projects or initiatives the college might wish to develop. There may well be implications for progression opportunities for staff who report to these managers as they might have higher levels of trust in former College A staff for promotion as they belong to the same clan, have similar values, and potentially will be less problematic and less challenging. Although organisational knowledge is very important, as is a sense of fairness, this notion could be expanded beyond mere knowledge and fairness to encompass organisational values, culture and norms. This approach will have the opportunity to afford the newly formed college a better

chance of having a management team that is able to manage the whole college more effectively, not former College A really well and former College B maybe not. The evidence from this study points to a management team of circa 35 people of whom one senior manager and two middle managers came from the former College B. However, teachers from College A seem to suggest that the management structure was fairly distributed; see quotes below.

'...when they restructured they took senior team members from both Colleges...' T3CA  
'...jobs, positions and roles meshed and merged..' T2CA

Both teachers indicate that the new structure offers a degree of fairness to bring in people from both former colleges together. Naturally, people's sense of fairness might differ so it may well seem fair for a former College A member of staff that three out of thirty-five managers is fair. However, T3CA, in the same discussion, made a highly perceptive point on how the structure was skewed the College A way and that it might feel like an invasion for College B staff; see quote below.

'...Probably skewed to the (College A) model.....my guess is if you are working at (College B), it just feels like an invasion....' T3CA

These quotes were describing the same situation but clearly differently and interestingly they didn't challenge each other even though they had the opportunity to do so. There is more than one possible explanation for the divergence in these teachers' views. One possibility, which was likely, was that teachers were speaking 'on-stage/off-stage' at different times (Pieterse, Caniëls and Homan, 2012). The alternative was that these were genuinely the perceived views, lived experiences, based on how they experienced that period of transition.

It is a point of fact that there was one senior member of staff and two Directors, from the former College B, in the new structure. However, there was a nuance about the proportionality of the appointments; see quote below

' ... there are approximately 35 executive members and directors, I think ...only three of those are (College B) staff. It doesn't make a positive effect on staff....' M3CB

M3CB's point was perceptive in that there was divergence in proportionality, which in turn will have a negative impact on staff from former College B. Whilst managers from former College B felt there was unfair distribution of senior and Director roles, the perception of

College A staff, was that the distribution of senior roles was fair; see quote below from former College A.

'...senior staff from both organisations have been included within the Senior Management Team so therefore it's familiar faces for both sets of staff...' M2CA

This divergence of viewpoints to the need for more purposeful work to bring staff together to align their views about what was happening to create one unified College. The Principal mentioned this in his interview as something that wasn't working well and that he was not sure what to do about it as he had expected that 'the natural curiosity' of teachers would encourage them to work together, to find out about each other but that they hadn't; see quote below.

'... but at the minute that's one disappointment I would think that there hasn't been enough natural mixing ... I suppose it does reflect a failure on my part I think in that sometimes unless we facilitate, it doesn't happen naturally whereas I tend to think surely teachers are naturally curious about.....they would find excuses to meet up and I haven't seen much evidence of that ....' Principal

It is highly perceptive of the Principal to acknowledge this as something that points to his failure; a human leader is a successful leader (Cartwright and Cooper, 2009). However, it is important to note how the new structure was perceived by College B managers too; see the quote below:

'... and then you realise that yes, people have been promoted and um we aren't going to get a look in in terms of any of our staff getting to Director positions...'. M1CB

'In fact I had a structure chart a couple of weeks before we merged and then it's looked very different on the day we merged' M3CB

These quotes reflect a deep sense of injustice, which leads to distrust and does not lead to building a unified institution and this will be discussed in 6.4.3. M1CB's point is more about having a chance, using the term a 'look in', so it is more about him taking part in the competition for these roles and having an equal opportunity.

There was another point which was about the pace of the merger, the speed at which the merger was implemented, see Appendix 4. There was a strong feeling from teachers and managers that the pace of the merger was too fast; see quotes from T2CA below. However, this wasn't seemingly an issue for the Principal or the Chair in that neither highlighted pace

as something that was imposed, or wasn't conducive or indeed pointing out that some of the issues were more a function of the pace of the merger. T2CA talked about how rushed it was; see below.

'... it kind of like felt so rushed and why did we, ...but why didn't they even consult with us and maybe a year to 18 months of a transition period where you can try things out...' T2CA

It seems that the pace of a merger change was important to staff as was planning 'trying out', which caused difficulties in building resilience, as in the literature, many mergers fail (Wolfe, 2019). Two important aspects to planning are the timing of what needs to be completed by when and allowing time for meaningful participation and consensus building. The Principal's point earlier in this section about having the structure ready for the first staff meeting in September, points to staff feeling, it seems, that they were 'being rushed'.

The picture that was building from listening to managers at College B was that there was a big jump, a massive leap from the moment in which they all supported College A during the 'beauty parade'<sup>2</sup> and the actual merger. This might be due to lack of clarity, vague communication or 'rose tinted glasses' of what was to come. It could, of course, also be part of the grief cycle that managers were experiencing, giving low morale, as one can see elements of anger, bargaining and depression in the discussions that took place (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

It seems during that time, managers at College B (and might have been the whole staff group at College B) had built a picture of their new reality that did not align to the reality/lived experience as it was by the time they attended the focus group some nine months into the merger. There are different possibilities which might have played a part in these feelings. The changes were being done without reference to what was being announced at the planning and implementation stages and were either unclear or the

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<sup>2</sup> 'beauty parade' refers to the process to select a merger partner in the English GFEC

rationale was not convincing, or that managers did not feel empowered enough to challenge these, or a variety of other similar notions.

Matters relating to merger management, pace and timing affect people and hence impact staff morale and emotional wellbeing in a profound and multifaceted way, leading to feelings of fragility, disempowerment, inability to contribute and feelings of lack of recognition. Merger management, pace and timing enable the development of a deeper insight into people aspects which will be reported in Chapter 5.

#### **4.5.2 Communication and Use of Language**

Communication and the language used, including use of specific words, both at the pre and post-merger stages are of critical importance to all staff in a merger situation (Steigenberger, 2016). Communication and use of language impact emotional wellbeing, trust and resentment as discussed earlier in this chapter. One of the three key pillars to successful mergers is communication; how effective and complete communication has a direct impact on the future success of a merger (Steigenberger, 2016). The other two pillars are planning and people (Steigenberger, 2016). All three are closely linked as communication affects people and part of what needs to be communicated are the plans. Communication is critically important to manage expectations, inform, keep people on-board, receive feedback, mitigate risks, and enhance people's ability to successfully navigate this profound change. It is also important to create a story for the merger which bring synergies together, not 'us versus them' but that it is a merger for a new beginning and to use communication before the announcement to bring people on board (Steigenberger, 2016). It is critically important that the message is consistent for the people of the two organisations as inconsistency breeds suspicion and mistrust, see 5.2.2. An important aspect to communication is to be 'in control' of the message and not let it roll without control, where communication is becoming reactive to leaks, rumour, anxiety and other such matters. Another aspect is not to let negative messages or rumours develop; they need to be dealt with by providing information and clarity.

The findings point to issues surrounding communication which mainly centre around consistency of message, synergies for both organisations and not being in control of the narrative. To miss-communicate creates negative sentiments for staff, mistrust and anxiety as reported in 5.2.2. The Principal acknowledged difficulties in communication during the interview which had not been anticipated; see quote below.

'...the other barrier is really just the difficulty of communicating in such a big organisation ... you can't just rely on the same (old) mechanisms, and I'd not seen that, I think that's a personal thing that I thought we could just do what we did in terms of...' Principal

What is apparent from the quote was that, at the point of the interview, the Principal had identified communication as a barrier. That communication was presenting difficulties, which he had not anticipated and that the issues were around senior leaders relying on their existing (former College A) communication mechanisms that were not working for the whole of the new college. This is perceptive of the Principal and reflects his ability to identify issues which is a key trait for a leader. However, it also reflects that there was insufficient planning of communication protocols which are one of the key determinants for merger success. One of the points relating to lack of planning of communication and not being in control of the message which emerged from the interview was about the 'choice of words' and that they might not have been ideal in some instances; see quote below.

' ....I mean we don't tend to start with blame but sometimes when you're working at speed you do tend to let your frustrations out when things don't improve as quickly as I'd like them to do....' Principal

The quote points to the Principal's sense of frustration which seemingly is normally kept in check but was let out due to working at speed. Elsewhere, the Principal spoke about talking about 'statement of fact' and 'heavy duty criticism'; see quote below.

'... I underestimated how much, if you are in a College that's done badly for a long period of time, how sensitive people are to anything that smacks of criticism as opposed to statements. They see any statement of fact as heavy duty criticism ...' Principal

The use of the term 'statements of fact' refers to presenting information about performance comparison between former Colleges A and B during the termly staff briefings. It was referred to as 'mistruths' by the manager from former College B; see quote below.

'... I feel that stats and statements have been swayed and mistruths been presented to the college group to change people's opinions .....' M1CB

M1CB clearly resented the content of the presentation and felt it was biased. Note the use of the term 'swayed' to indicate that there was a plan to change listeners' opinion about former College B. Another emergent communication issue was when M1CB, spoke about 'them and us'; see quote below.

'... when people come to do the presentations here, 'you and us' and actually you are still not good and you are very lucky to have us ...' M1CB

M1CB was concerned about how the message delivery was being managed. It was clear that what M1CB had wanted was a different approach to communication which builds on synergies and a joint future rather than 'you and us'. M1CB went on to give a really insightful view of how communication should and could have been managed; see quote below.

'... it should've been completely the other way round in terms of you know aren't we lucky to have you, you've brought some great members of staff, and some great buildings, and you know, let's look at.....' M1CB

Clearly M1CB had wanted the communication to be sensitively planned such that it acknowledged expertise, raised hopes about the future, dealt with people's feelings and fragility, all of which are acknowledged in the literature as the givens for merger success (Steigenberger, 2016).

Other aspects of communication which are equally important such as ill thought-through internal communication (in either college) or flippant comments that might have profound impact on perception after merger which takes a lot of undoing, cause a lack of trust and lack of respect of professional expertise which demotivates people. M3CB was critical of the internal communication within College A prior to the merger which didn't create a helpful atmosphere for staff to want to merge and work together; see quote.

'...but it doesn't read very well from both sides, from the (College A) side either, in fact theirs is probably worse. And I think that's because they were told that we're merging with this terrible College so therefore they automatically think oh great, they've got so much debt we are not going to get our pay rise anymore, and you're going to bring our quality down because you know.....' M3CB

M3CB was clearly thinking of the impact of the internal communication within College A prior to the merger and how that might have impacted the receptiveness of College A staff to the merger, to wanting to get to know College B staff, to the respect they got. M2CB supported this view and it was what was communicated internally within College A prior to the merger. It felt like an open secret; see below.

'That's exactly what they were told coz I've had the staff down there, some of the teaching staff tell me that's exactly the message that they were given...' M2CB

M3CB also reaffirmed this piece of communication and how staff, in former College A, believed they would not be awarded a pay rise due to the merger; see below.

'But some people hadn't, you know, are still feeling that and they still think they are not going to get a pay rise coz they've now merged with us....' M3CB

M3CB was clearly struggling with this view from staff even though it might not have been intended by management. Another example is where the Principal said, in a staff briefing at College B that College B hadn't paid its invoices on time a few years earlier, see below.

'Instead of its always dwelling on the things that are wrong here, always every staff meeting, full staff meeting, has been oh and by the way you didn't pay your invoices within 30 days three years ago' M1CB

The difficulty, it seems, for this manager was that the issue was not relevant to the mission of the college, it did not relate with her deeply held values about learners' success and their aspirations. This way, the Principal had misjudged the mood of his new members of staff, so though he was sharing facts and as he saw it information, the purpose was to tell them that their old college was not well run. However, he might have picked a poor example as the payment of invoices was seen, by the manager and agreed by the others in the focus group, as the Principal looking for evidence to denigrate their work and their college instead of identifying areas that matter.

One of the most profound quotes came from T6CB, when she spoke about the style of communication from the Principal, during the termly staff briefings, see below.

'..., the first one he told us how rubbish we were, the second one he told us how rubbish we were and the third one he told us how good he was basically and he did not justify, if something was bad at (College A) he would justify it, if something was bad at (College B) you know, it was just bad.' T6CB



This quotation refers to what the Principal referred to as 'information' and 'statements of fact', yet the way these messages had landed were non-conducive to bringing about the staff to aim for improvement and success, rather of feeling resentment. Another, T4CA from former College A spoke about insufficient communication about changes, see below.

'A lot of systems have been changed across both colleges without the communicational thought, it seems,..' T4CA

When staff do not know the changes or do not understand the rationale for changes, that creates suspicion and at times non-compliance. Such negative communication issues affect staff loyalty, commitment and wellbeing. Reactive communication and firefighting does not lead to well-planned and considered communication. T2CA refers in the quote below to 'peeling bit by bit' to mean information was being released in drips and drabs rather than a well thought through, clearly communicated road map for the merger, see below.

'... So just generally communication was cited as a particular problem but with this particular thing I think communications could've been better in a lot of ways and I think overall there could've been a road map that was put out that says here's (College B) and that's what they are about, that's what they stand for, this is who we are and that's who (College A) are and over a period of a number of years our aim is to be this, this is what our aim is, is to be this and that's how those values will come together...., instead of this kind of like, peeling out bit by bit of stuff without a kind of an overall clear vision of what would be.....' T2CA

The quote also refers to clarity of vision which is central to the communication of the message.

An interesting and insightful perspective was brought up by M3CA, in which he spoke about open and authentic communication from the Principal; it clearly worked well at the former College A, see the quote below.

'... I think what I find particularly with (Principal) and do correct me if I'm wrong, is actually the staff are some of the first to know. So dialogue takes place doesn't it, but then as soon as he can get that out and is able to get that out to people, he does and you know that you're going to know within an organisation if something is going to happen rather than hearing it in the Press or through an...' M3CA

This quote links well to how the Principal described how well communication worked previously but the old methods of former College A do not seem to work across the whole of the newly formed college. This point links well to the planning imperative of communication, messages, language, as well as training for staff who manage such important aspects of the

merger. Authenticity and consistency of message affect trust, see the quote below from T4CB.

'Sometimes it feels like he (Principal) tells he's telling one College something different from the other to get a response or to make some kind of competition between the two'. T4CB

'... it wasn't 100% accurate in terms of what we thought we were getting...' M2CB

It seems T4CB does not trust what the Principal says as it is moderated to provoke a reaction or to what each audience wants/needs to hear so there was, he suggests, no authenticity nor consistency. Also, M2CB suggests that they were not told the whole story ahead of the merger, again leaving doubt in her head about how truthful and authentic the communication was.

Communication of plans, progress, decisions, justification for decisions, structures and use of language are critical to the way merger is received and change is rationalised by staff. They affect staff emotional wellbeing, trust and morale profoundly. Aspects of emotional wellbeing, trust and recognition will be discussed in chapter 5.

## **4.6 Opportunity to Reflect**

One of the most profound findings was that participants, from both former colleges, engaged in reflection. It seems that the utilisation of the 'nominal group technique' had enabled the reflective practice to take place (McMillan, King and Tully, 2016). Once the inductive thematic analysis was complete, it became clear that during every one of the focus group sessions, staff engaged in introspection and reflection with their peers (Raelin, 2002). It was as though they were looking for a forum and they interpreted and/or subconsciously decided to use the focus group as their opportunity to engage, with their peers, in reflective practice (Welsh and Dehler, 2004).

The Principal, also, engaged in reflection during the interview, so while discussing communication difficulties, as reported earlier in 4.5.2, he spoke about what he had not expected, see below.

'... you can't just rely on the same mechanisms and I'd not seen that, I think that's a personal thing that I thought we could just do what we did in terms of, ...' Principal

He was reflecting by saying, 'and I'd not seen that'. In another insight from the Principal, he was reflecting on the approach to merger, see below.

'..which if you haven't been that good at your teaching I'm not sure the way we've approached the merger really, really at the moment forces you to change your behaviour because you've kept your job, you've got a pay rise and everybody keeps saying it's going well' Principal

He was talking about how it must feel not to be good yet, and reflecting on whether the way College A had managed the merger would incentivise teachers, from College B, to improve their practice. He spoke about teachers keeping their job, receiving a pay rise and so on. He was clearly engaging in reflective practice, questioning the way he had done things, questioning his own judgement, questioning whether that was the right approach. All of the focus groups, teachers and managers, from both former Colleges engaged in considerable reflective practice, see example quotes below to help demonstrate.

'I mean it's quite funny because every time you've said what are the Principal and Senior Leadership Team are doing to make this happen, we always float back into what we are happening, what we're doing and think that's kind of given you an answer really...' M1CA

'As long as competition doesn't grow to resentment, that's the thing' M3CA

'I feel uninvolved, I think, look I'm going to put that there as well' T1CA

'Probably skewed to a (College A) model' T4CA

'Probably skewed to the (College A) model....my guess is if you are working at (College B), it just feels like an invasion' T5CA

Highly perceptive, deep reflection.....

'So knowing that, generally out in the public they know that (College B) was a Grade 4 many times and financially in trouble and so straight away a lot of the staff....all these new things that we've had to take on, nobody minds or if they haven't liked it, they just instantly blamed (College B) and said well it's all because of you, because you were not a very good college in the first place, so we're suffering because of you. So there's this negative starting point which I don't think was properly addressed. I don't think they sold (college B) in a nice way or why they're doing it, what benefits they'll be etc...'T6CA

'...felt that there's been the demanding of cultural alignment to that of College A rather than understanding College B culture and building a new unified culture. 'M1CB

'They have stressed it is not a 'them and us' culture but there has been too much comparison which can only be seen as them and us.'T5CB

There are many more examples but what all of the above examples have in common is the participants' need to engage in reflection about the merger, their positionality, whether pro or against merger, how they felt it had impacted their wellbeing, sense of value and recognition of their professional expertise. In Chapter 5, details of the findings that pertain to staff wellbeing, 'them and us culture' and trust in leadership will be reported.

# **Chapter 5 Findings Part (2); Organisational Culture**

## **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter continues the reporting of the findings from this study which started in Chapter 4. This chapter focusses on the ways in which the merger affected the emotional wellbeing of staff and the implications for merger leadership in the future.

## **5.2 Emotional Wellbeing**

Emotional wellbeing, in this study, is concerned with the ways in which management action, communication and leadership decisions were made and how people were affected by these actions. In the exchange below, managers from former College B clearly articulated how their own emotional wellbeing and fragility were affected by the merger. They also reported that they felt they had a duty to protect the staff they line managed. Powerful and expressive feelings such as their emotional wellbeing, fragility, motivation/demotivation and morale were all in these managers' consciousness to such an extent that they used these descriptors early in the focus group discussions without any need for probing. These terms reflect a deep sense of impact of the merger on themselves and staff they line manage. These managers were extremely committed to the College, to their staff and students and their passion was abundantly clear, see below.

'.... Principal ignored staff emotional well-being and fragility at a difficult time.' M1CB

'Yeah absolutely and that's... staff fragility and wellbeing was that motivation and morale is at rock bottom and seems to get lower every week and that's resulted in people leaving but redundancy I believe that they don't make redundancies in College A group but they certainly seem to push people down that pathway for one reason or another' M3CB

'They demotivate...' M2CB

'Absolutely. When you've got some excellent staff who are usually chirpy and cheery...' M3CB

'Don't forget we are operational, not strategic' M1CB

'That's right, that's right' M2CB

'...Well it is difficult, we are living this but as a manager my staff are living it....and I am quite protective of my staff so I am going to be very conscious.....making sure that they're looked after and having conversations with them just to get an internal barometer.....' M1CB

As can be seen, M1CB articulates that although he was being subjected to experiences that affected his own wellbeing that had demotivated him, he was conscious that his staff were living through similar experiences and he had a responsibility to protect them and raise their morale. He recognised the need to keep checking the 'internal barometer' to ensure he was available to talk to staff and support them. This also reflects his passion and commitment to his role as a manager and to the College. Participants spoke about staff fragility and the need to be 'there for them', to support them and look after them. M1CB also spoke about a sense of unfairness and of getting rid of people one way or another. Managers also reported that staff were being pushed so they leave which was explored in section 4.5.1. M1CB also spoke about 'operational not strategic', intimating that this must have been said directly or indirectly which carries a lot of meaning around demotivation, non-recognition of professional expertise, demotion, not being valued and other such feelings. It also seemed sarcastic when he said it which implies he did not agree and didn't think a lot of it but clearly was offended by it. There was a great deal of consensus between the three managers as they all supported each other and built on each other's points; notice the use of 'absolutely', 'that's right', 'yeah absolutely' and such like in the exchange above.

The perspective of the teachers from College B seems to support this view. In the quote below, T1CB suggests, in his view, that was the modus operandi.

'.... to manage staff out and replace them' T1CB

This seems to support the view from their managers, as was reported earlier, that staff were being 'pushed' out. There was a potential implication emanating from this perception of management in that it might well be linked to the desire and need of College A to change the culture quickly and this is usually done by removing those that do not fit, 'the trouble makers'. This area may need further exploration as part of future study but there isn't sufficient evidence to support this intimation as part of this study. There is evidence that people were made to leave but this issue was not central to the research question and hence it wasn't probed into further at the data collection phase. The Principal was clear on what was negotiable and what wasn't and a view that those staff who didn't wish to be part of the new reality could leave.

However, there was a different perspective, which came from one of the middle managers at the former College A. He described a constant positive message delivery, as below.

'The overall message is delivered in a constantly positive tone from the Senior Management Team which reassures staff who feel concerned or fragile in either of the institutions post-merger'. M4CA

This quote noted the need for positive messages and consistency of message as a means of helping raise morale and improving the emotional wellbeing of staff across both colleges. It is also worth noting that M4CA experienced examples when this was being done, for example when the Principal met curriculum teams from both former colleges. It is entirely possible for staff to experience the same event differently as these experiences were shaped differently by emotions of fragility, success, acknowledgement and so forth (Kiefer, 2002). It is also possible that what was happening here was the 'on-stage/off-stage' phenomenon (Pieterse, Caniëls and Homan, 2012) which might be an attempt to copy the Principal's behaviour and might emanate from the perspective that the Principal knows best or indeed a fake attempt at building cohesion in the College. The issue with this quote was that it was rather isolated and it did not bode well with what the other participants were saying.

Staff fragility also came out during the Principal's interview. He described people as sensitive.

'I think I underestimated how much, if you are in a College that's done badly for a long period of time, how sensitive people are to anything that smacks of criticism as opposed to statements. They see any statement of fact as heavy-duty criticism...they are, lashing out probably too strong, but they have been able to ask me difficult questions and then they'll clap the question so that told me it is an issue' Principal

This reflects his sense of frustration when he was trying to share information and he calls these 'statements of fact', yet staff see them as criticisms of them. There was a sense of resentment in the Principal's tone. It is worth noting the specific terms which the Principal used, such as, 'lashing out' and that staff had 'clapped to signal...'. This reading into the situation is supported by the M1CB talking about 'mistruths' during briefings, which will be explored further in the 'them and us culture' section below.

It is worth acknowledging however, that the Principal recognised staff fragility and their emotional wellbeing as important and the importance of the questions through clapping. He was clearly sensitive enough to recognise the issue of staff fragility but not prepared to be questioned or challenged. Was this behaviour indicative of lack of insight for the Principal on people matters in merger situations? It is possible that the frustration might emanate from lack of knowhow of how to deal with staff fragility or due to him expecting a sense of gratitude from staff which he didn't receive. The frustration and resentment on both sides (College B and Principal) were indicative of differing aspects, views and expectations. The staff resented the way the merger was conducted, the pace of change and non-attention to emotional wellbeing, whereas the Principal resented the attitude of staff towards him, how staff received his briefings, the new structure and management changes. It could be argued that frustration on both sides is a display of passion for the merger to succeed rather than resentment of the merger itself. Teachers from College B also displayed a sense of resentment and fragility. The exchange below between teachers from College B demonstrates this point.



'... I find that quite difficult to do because I was so trying to be positive about what he (the Principal) has done and I know that there is a lot of animosity really about where we are and with the merger from (College B) point of view' T3CB

'... (town) campus has been portrayed in a very poor light and the staff have felt hurt and offended' T5CB<sup>3</sup>

These, and many other similar statements, from College B teachers, exhibit resentment to the Principal and what he had said and done which hinder positive organisational culture. It is important to be mindful of the timing of this study as it is entirely possible that these feelings and sentiments would change over time.

College B participants, it seems, wanted the merger to succeed but had issues with the way it was managed and communicated, for example, see the quote below.

'Can I say that from the Principal's point of view, I don't think that he ever meant for that to happen that way'. M2CB

It seems that M2CB wanted the merger to work and did not want to sabotage it. M2CB was clear, it appears, that the Principal's actions were not intentional. The exchange during the focus group, see below, shows that there was agreement, scepticism and reaffirmation with confidence, see below.

'No?' M3CB

'OK so you think it was with the best intentions?' M1CB

'I think it was with the best intentions' M2CB

It is not possible to identify, from the available evidence, why the two managers felt this way and the third did not trust the Principal, a missed opportunity to probe during the focus group. That said, one mustn't lose sight of the fact that the emotional wellbeing of staff in College B was low due to the way the merger was conducted.

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<sup>3</sup> Reference to the town being deprived, the staff who lived in that town were offended the most

It is equally important to note that the experience of teachers was only negative in some departments, not in all. In the case of T6CB, there were distinct improvements due to the merger, see below:

'Yeah and in my department it's probably totally different to other departments so I see big improvements and I see that actually it's been a beneficial thing for us .....' T6CB

In the exchange that followed this statement from T6CB, she was able to articulate why, in her view, her experience was markedly different, see the exchange below:

'... And I've clearly had, in regards to the culture and the merger, I've clearly had benefits that you probably haven't had so I have got now a new manager who is from (College A) who has embraced us and is learning from us and also bringing in you know the bits from (College A) so ... sharing good practice between both' T6CB

'... I've had a very successful merge ... In (my department). The manager has taken the time to organise us to go down and meet her old team as it was who were really nice people, who showed us around, you know and that alone I feel has stopped lots of barriers ..... So I think that was probably the magic wand that perhaps we all could've done with'. T6CB

In the following section, key themes which contribute to the emotional wellbeing of staff are described.

### **5.2.1 Them and Us Culture**

During the focus groups and the interviews, there were clear indications of culture difference between the two former Colleges, as indicated by teachers and managers from both colleges. In the quote below, T1CA, felt there was a distinct sense of difference.

'...Small groups of students, it's much more relaxed .....I think that's my overwhelming sense of the difference is that I think (College A) got a very much you know there's going to be certain things expected of you, you know you're bum's going to be kicked if it's not done so when somebody comes in to talk to you they don't want to talk about all the shades of grey, they want to know what's going to be done ....'T1CA

One can start to see that College A seems more formal with a strict working culture and College B, in her view, more relaxed and less formal. It is possible to interpret this comment as the cause for former College B to be inadequate. However, there is ample evidence from practice and academic literature which suggests that a college in which professional

teachers are trusted to work in peer networks with purposeful endeavour to improve practice tend to achieve faster improvements and have a more sustainable quality cycles, rather than top down management diktat (O'Leary *et al.*, 2019). To be collegial is by no means weak and indecisive; management that recognises and employs diffused leadership practice and trust is much more effective in achieving its goals, though this is counter to the prevailing thinking of the majority of management schools over the past three decades (By, Diefenbach and Klarner, 2008; Devecchi *et al.*, 2018).

Managers from College B also expressed their sense of difference and how sometimes they were put down by being labelled not good with a selective unauthentic use of data to back this labelling. For managers to be effective, they need to be able to work with their peers and reports in a trusted manner that recognises and acknowledges their expertise. If managers are labelled as not worthy and ineffective, it deceives the point, they won't be effective as the environment is not conducive for them to be effective, for example, see the exchange below.

'As always been this, when people [referring to the Principal's termly presentations at College B] come to do the presentations here [at College B], you and us and actually you are still not good and you are very lucky to have us and it should've been completely the other way round in terms of you know aren't we lucky to have you, you've brought some great members of staff, and some great buildings, and you know, let's look at.....but that's not how it was sold and I think that has probably been the biggest mistake of it [merger management and merger communication]...' M1CB

'Do we have one of dishonesty and inequality.... I feel that stats and statements have been swayed and mistruths been presented to the College group to change people's opinions or for want of a better term, beat people down' M2CB

The sense of resentment and mistrust is noteworthy, these sentiments and feelings were mirrored by teachers from former College B. Data ownership and with whom the data is shared and in which form, are critical in this context as can be seen from how M1CB have reacted to it. Knowledge, as Foucault said, is power and it is important that knowledge and the sharing of knowledge might have been used as an expression of power (Lemke, 2002). M1CB expressed issues with labelling with no means to objectively examine the evidence base as the use of data was during the Principal's presentation and not in a meaningful session in which data was being analysed authentically to draw learning and decide on effective action. Withholding data is an expression of power too and to put the other side, in this case College B managers, at a distinct disadvantage, as they do not have access to data

for the former two colleges to enable them to at least draw their own conclusions. M1CB goes further by labelling the way these presentations were planned and executed to be a mistake, as opposed to being a little more measured in her description. The use of the word mistake provides interesting insights into her feelings about the way the new college is developing, she was probably despondent about the approach as she might have tried and failed to convince the Principal not to go ahead in the way that he did. M1CB might have suggested an alternative approach which she believed would work better but not found a listening ear, hence becoming vocal and expressive about her disapproval. When managers are not concealing their judgement in this way, it is indicative of a potential breakdown in the relationship between them and senior leaders. Note that M2CB started his point in a question form as though he was seeking permission to be this critical of the Principal in conduct and in communication. M2CB spoke about dishonesty, mistruths, swaying data pointing to a deliberate and purposeful separation between the two colleges to degrade College B. One of the most powerful traits of the nominal group technique in relation to this study was that these thoughts and points were created in silence, no group thinking and no influence from one on another (McMillan, King and Tully, 2016).

Teachers from College B were equally critical of the culture, see the following exchange.

'A culture competition has emerged through statistics being misrepresented in staff meetings.'

T1CB

'There appears to be different cultures within (College A) and (College B) ....' T2CB

It was evident that there was alignment between the views of College B participants about how different they felt and how different they were made to feel. Teachers spoke about the difference in culture, about a competition culture between the two former colleges. It is important to note that the aforementioned teachers and managers were referring to the same briefings, where the Principal addresses all staff, in their own campus, on a termly basis to bring them up to date with the performance of the College. The point that these teachers and managers were making was that the data on success, retention and attendance was being presented by former College A and hence showing a difference between the performance of the former two colleges. These are the same staff meetings which the Principal referred to in his interview as 'statement of fact as heavy-duty criticism'. This difference of view and hence approach, points to either a level of intransigence where the Principal was not prepared to listen to College B teachers and managers or a deliberate approach to put former College B down. Either way, it was not conducive to the creation of

a unified successful college for the benefit of its learners and its community. The difference in culture seems to have been discussed by management as evident from the quote below.

'They have stressed it is not a 'them and us' culture but there has been too much comparison which can only be seen as them and us.' T5CB

T5CB was mindful of the difference, recognised what leaders had said about cultural difference but made the point about the approach, by saying 'too much comparison' and how that was emphasising 'them and us'. That is to say, in this teacher's view, it wasn't aligning culture. The important point to note here is that neither teachers, nor leaders and managers, were oblivious to cultural differences between the two former colleges. However, the teachers were not convinced, it seems, that the comparison was helping to bring the two cultures together.

It could be argued that the Principal was also aware of the potential difference in cultures ahead of the merger as the following quote seems to indicate.

'... it was very clear at the outset that they (College A governors) didn't want to change the culture of College A ...' Principal

The Principal's language highlights the perceived difference in culture. During the Principal's interview, he made the above statement as he was describing what was agreed with the College A Board of Governors ahead of agreeing to the merger. This indicates that organisational culture matters were in the consciousness of the Board and the Principal before they entered into the merger but had taken the view that their organisational culture was going to be the prevailing one. Once the merger had been enacted, precisely when this study was taking place, it seems there were examples of cultural differences which were articulated by respondents. In the quote below, the Principal highlights how different the two former colleges were.

'.... we [College A] had decided student discipline was a big, was something we should get in terms of common culture straight away. So we had a cross-College meeting. We came across with a new set of measures and how we would do things particularly to get attendance right, right from the word go and we trained tutors to do that. And then they didn't do it (at College B), they didn't do it at all. They were just too soft, you know, they just, 'well I did talk to that person', 'well, did you send a letter home to the parent?', 'ah, well I didn't do that'. And clearly they and I think that wasn't because they were trying to be deliberately non-compliant or didn't even agree with the policy; I think it was almost like they couldn't bring themselves to do something that was so different to how they were operating before. And we didn't see that and I think in some areas we would have seen that but in that particular area it was a (College B) person who's the Director of (department name) ...' Principal

One can have a really deep insight into the thinking of the Principal from the quote above. The Principal highlighted the first difference, in his view, by explaining that compliance was never an issue in former College A. The Principal had identified that the initial process which had led to the agreement of the new cross-college arrangements was consultative and inclusive. So it seems the Principal was frustrated by this apparent non-compliance. One might wonder on how consultative and inclusive this process was; College B staff may have been told of what had been agreed rather than consulted in a meaningful way. College B staff might have not been given the opportunity to voice their opinion on whether this approach might work or that there may be a more appropriate approach. So, this 'agreement' which the Principal describes might have felt, for College B staff, superficial and had never been considered authentic. It is also possible to frame it that College B did not comply as an act of defiance against College A management as they were being treated as less competent and less effective, a form of resistance and subversion.

It might have been that College B teachers had not complied for the simple reason that the new cross-college arrangements were not important for them. College A managers might have not invested time to understand College B enough so that such decisions could be derived in ways that were more meaningful and more convincing and hence more likely to be complied with. The decision may have been made for College B staff but not with them and hence it wasn't a priority for them to comply with it and not challenge it because there was no alternative for them but to keep a low profile. Interestingly, the Principal's reasoning for the College not identifying this issue early enough was because the Director was a former (College B) Director, with different culture. Clearly there was a different organisational culture which the Principal was frustrated by because he felt, in this instance, that leaders did what they needed to do 'cross-college' for the two sides to work together. It seems there were more issues which might have led to this problem, yet the Principal was somewhat simplistic in thinking that it was not picked up because the Director was a former

College B manager. The Principal's view of the culture difference echoes that from T1CA, at the beginning of this section, in which she spoke about 'shades of grey'. The Principal's approach might be indicative of a superficial approach to understanding College B and hence understanding the issue of compliance, without talking to College B staff to attempt to develop a deeper understanding of them and how such decisions need to be arrived at. An alternative view point is that the Principal's approach, it seems, was a top down command and control rather than to develop a deeper understanding of his staff. The point about command and control top down diktat can be related to T1CA when she spoke about 'bum kicked.' Both of the aforementioned arguments point to the Principal and senior leaders needing to develop deeper understanding of 'people matters', not just performative management of actions and processes, showing differences in culture as opposed to competence.

On the other hand, managers from College A acknowledged the importance of culture and were able to cite multiple examples of the Principal and senior leaders bringing together the two cultures of the former Colleges together. They reported that they witnessed this approach from the outset; see quote below.

'Principal's work to address the 'them/us' culture that has been apparent since August to ensure that it's a merger rather than a takeover which is sometimes felt amongst the staff'.  
M1CA

It is interesting that M1CA acknowledged the existence of 'them and us culture', note the use of 'sometimes felt.', since the beginning but importantly recognising how the Principal was working to bring the two cultures together. It is possible that M1CA was exhibiting 'on-stage/off-stage' traits, in that she was showing her colleagues, during the focus group, that she was holding the side. It is clear though that this was a College A view of this experience and was not matched by College B managers. The quotes below illustrate different examples of how, in these managers' views, the Principal was working to bring the two cultures together.

'Encouragement of departments to work together...do their trips together and sharing resources and good practice'. M2CA

'CPD – English and Maths CPD last year before the merger officially took place was a joint session on sharing good practice.... our whole staff conference will be in (college B)'. M3CA

'Senior managers evaluated similarities and differences between the two Colleges and took the best of both worlds, for example EBS, ProMonitor, HR, next year data and exams'. M4CA

'Updating policies, procedures and working practices taking best ideas across the Group and making this the single expected way to do things'. M5CA

'Staff encouraged to visit each other in their relevant areas ...'. M2CA

'One staff development date altogether planned for July this year to meet and address them and us problems from our end' M1CA

'.....a lot of (College B) working methods and staff taking the lead to avoid the (College A) 'taking over' (college B) aspect I feel, that's not always popular with some staff I've had here (College A)'. M6CA

The quotes above are grouped together to show that all managers from former College A had an example to share, a couple more than one, which was positive. So for example, organising joint CPD (continuous professional development), encouraging visits and other examples are all positive and are likely to contribute to bringing staff together to become a team. However, the point from M6CA above needs further looking into. The manager spoke about (College B) staff taking the lead to 'avoid a College A take-over' which has been established as something that was felt across the whole college and there was evidence from the Principal's interview and the chair's interview that it was the case that (College A) way of doing things would prevail. M6CA also spoke about 'not always popular....here'. This was rather insightful in that it seems to suggest that staff in College A were not keen for staff from College B to lead on initiatives or change. Is this indicating that it was not just leaders in College A but also other staff in College A wanting to be the prevailing group in the new college? One has to wonder.

The other possibility was that one needs to be mindful that in any organisation there would be a spread of views and opinions so in this case, there might have been some staff who were close to this manager whose perspective was that it was for College A staff to lead. It is also possible that M6CA might have been rustling with the 'on-stage/off-stage' behaviour, which was discussed earlier in this chapter, and over compensating for the 'take-over' feeling by suggesting that College B staff were leading. The other point to note was that



staff from former College A were prevailing, they were not the ones who lost their identity and were potentially losing their organisational culture, sense of belonging, so they stuck together, they could afford to be more benevolent. M6CA's point however does need further exploration because it might be suggesting that staff in former College A, in his perspective, were not being taken along the journey by working with leaders on why it is important for the 'whole college' to be involved and not to be seen as the 'over-bearers'. Naturally, it is possible that other managers were exhibiting the 'on-stage/off-stage' behaviour, such as M5CA, as it contradicts what the Principal had said about the College A way being the prevailing way. Both managers M1CA & M3CA pointed to different staff development opportunities to bring staff together, which would be good to promote and roll out. Further to the acknowledgment from (College A) managers that a 'them and us' culture existed, there was a subtle sense of optimism about the future and that the daily challenges are common to all, see quote below.

'... I think then they'll (College B) realise, won't they, that actually everybody's got different issues that they are concerned about and that everyone's, you know, it's to try and eliminate that 'them and us'. Isn't it, it's really we're all part of the same team.' M1CA

One can sense M1CA's passion for things to work and for staff from College B not to be too alienated, as staff from College A also have issues but they are all one team. Culture is also identity, belonging and having a sense of who one is and what the value is of what one does, so a lack of recognition for what College B had achieved affects belonging to this new college as it is not the combination of the two colleges (merger) but rather an enlarged College A by subsuming College B. It is possible that College B staff felt they were the losers from this merger.

There was also a sense of camaraderie in that managers (College A) believed that the action of their leaders would help bring a sense of unity. So, for example, M1CA spoke about his plans to bring all of his staff together which would help remove barriers.

'... I think this Summer and Winter in a way, is going to be the making, because we've got one-hour directorate (time) I think, that's going to be fabulous, because it's like...I'm going to create a bit of a structure (for my department) to give them something each to think about or work about but actually work together on and deliberately puts people from...'. M1CA

However, it is important to recognise that former College A staff weren't a homogenous group, so for example, T1CA below spoke about being uninvolved, see quote below.

'I personally feel uninvolved.' T1CA

This teacher felt uninvolved which means it was not sufficient for her to be in her bubble but rather she wanted to be involved in her college and its future. There were clearly more complex dimensions to the dynamics of these work relationships than a simple approach to teachers only needing to be concerned with teaching their students. It seems teachers need to be involved in the life of their institution and feel a sense of belonging, they need to be listened to and feel that their views matter for the organisational culture to evolve into a work community with a united vision and thriving future. The relationship between teachers and managers is critical for the success of any education institution. Such aspects of the working relationships within a work setting contribute to forming and affirming the professional identity of teachers and managers and hence need to be considered carefully and meaningfully. Teachers are not only needed within a regimented work environment by teaching learners but need to be an important part of the whole institution just like any other key constituent of the college. Teachers T2CA & T3CA felt that the merger was seemingly skewed their way; see below.

'Probably skewed to a (College A) model' T2CA

'Probably skewed to the (College A) model...my guess is if you are working at (College B), it just feels like an invasion'. T3CA

By saying this, it shows that staff from former College A were feeling for, and reflecting about, what it must feel like to be in College B. It shows that they cared about them. It is also important to note that T1CA for example felt 'uninvolved', which implies a question, 'why aren't I involved', or 'can I be involved?' It also shows that teachers have a lot to do with merger even though they may not be teaching in the other College. Merger does not only concern managers but all staff, hence teachers saying 'skewed, invasion, uninvolved' and so forth. It is also important to note that there was a clear implication of a 'them and us' culture, as the teachers did not say for example, that 'it was all forgotten and we are one team now'.

'Them and Us' culture, in this study, focusses on organisational culture. It points to staff perception that there were elements in the management of the merger, which worked to create division; a feeling that you are different from us, pointing to different ways of dealing with things. That is to say, the way staff react to different stimuli or behave in different

situations. Typically, 'them and us' culture does not signify superior or inferior, or better or worse, but rather different ways of doing things and dissimilar ways of going about resolving matters. However, in this case, the evidence points to a sense of superiority from College A.

All of the aforementioned contribute to a critically important aspect of staff emotional wellbeing during and after merger where staff, from both former Colleges, need to have a sense of 'oneness', of being involved, of wanting to work together and joining forces. Developing a deeper insight into 'them and us' culture will enable a better understanding into how the emotional wellbeing of staff is affected by management decisions, management conduct, communication, language and pace of merger. This deep insight should enable more effective management to achieve merger success. It is important to note the relatedness of people aspects such as emotional wellbeing to the management, timing, pace, communication and use of language in mergers which were discussed in Chapter 4. Failure to lead, manage, time, pace and communicate well would lead to damage of staff wellbeing and the creation of negative cultures that lead to resentment and mistrust.

### **5.2.2 Resentment & Mistrust**

Resentment relates to ill will and it emanates from a sense of injustice and unfairness. Resentment is closely related to being unvalued, powerless and undermined, leading to anger and a sense of disempowerment. It leads, in some cases, to noncompliance, disagreement and mistrust in management action (Donovan, 2019). Resentment is initiated by a perception of being wronged. When one is in a state of resentment, it affects their way of being in not conforming to management instructions and leads to mistrust of management (Donovan, 2019).

Resentment of management action, of performativity and of management edicts, were apparent in this case study. It was evident during the observation event, during the focus groups and to a lesser extent during the Principal's interview. The quote below from M1CA displays resentment of the merger.

'Yes, absolutely, and they actually had, because one of the other moans and groans was about annual leave wasn't it? They had, we have a week shut down, they had two, but they didn't tell, quite interestingly all they moaned about was the fact that I was finishing on the Friday and they had another week to go and so I'm trying to be diplomatic and all upbeat like you do but actually do you know what, they had two week shut down and they were apparently given the option as a College to come in line with ours.' M1CA

As can be seen in the above quote, this manager was clearly resentful of staff in College B about how they were not upfront about the information, which caused him to have to be 'diplomatic'. This matter of being 'diplomatic' might be a display of the 'on stage/off stage' phenomenon quite rationally and seemingly the way to be for this manager; note the use of the term 'like you do'.

A resentful employee, or more profoundly resentful groups of employees, academics argue, can cause lower staff morale and undermine organisational goals (Pieterse, Caniëls and Homan, 2012; Minett, 2015). This employee's resentment can stem, as was evidenced in staff focus groups of both College A and College B for teachers and managers, from lack of attention on staff emotional wellbeing (Stewart, 2003). Resentment was clearly displayed by many during the focus groups. In the case of College A staff, it was displayed by expressions like.

'I now have to spend time on the road travelling between sites which is not taken into account when considering my workload' or 'we were working very well as a College, focussing on our students, why do we have to change the way we do things because we have had to merge with College B'? M3CA

Resentment emanates, a lot of the time, from lack of clarity of purpose and lack of clarity of mission (Babnik *et al.*, 2014). That is to say, why things are happening and why things are having to change. In this case, resentment seems to stem from a lack of understanding about why merging in the first place or why certain changes were made. Communication clearly plays an important role and was explored in depth in 4.5.2, but there is a more nuanced matter here, which was whether staff bought into the purpose to merge. To approach the purpose to merge with a simplistic communication which merely says that 'merger is good for our college' or 'they need help and we can help them' (College B) does not help staff buy into the merger notion, the upheaval is far too high and it is a very high price to pay. These missed opportunities to ensure that staff were on-board lead to resentment of management edicts and noncompliance. This case study does not delve into the past of either institution to explore whether resentment, for example, was present prior

to the merger and hence the leaders of College A needed to be more alert to matters of resentment, mistrust and such like. When management edicts are resented, they reflect on how staff engage and their willingness to change. Staff might seem unwilling to engage, which in turn, seems intransigent but in actual fact, they are sometimes displaying traits of resentment. Naturally staff willingness to change is not a linear process, such as management would require staff to change, explain that it is necessary and important, when staff do not, they are branded as unwilling to change. In reality, willingness to change is not linear, so many factors affect it and also it is not always for staff to change, many times, it is for management to change too. In the quote below, M1CA was resenting that he was being held to account about non-compliance in his area, see below.

'What I alluded to there is you are being held to account for it so you personally and your team are being held to account for something that actually really needed more time for implementation and training and obviously training is asked for, so, yes, Thursday at 2 but all my staff are teaching...well get them to get cover...no, that's disrespectful, you can't keep asking staff to cover things because you are putting pressure on other staff and learners are going 'oh, here we go another cover teacher' or 'here we go....we've got to go to the library and do paperwork'. So in other words it's the implementation of systems whilst respecting the day job of an individual i.e. good classroom teaching.' M1CA

What this manager was resenting was not just the management edict but also seemingly, losing focus on their mission, their purpose to exist, when he was told to arrange cover for teachers to enable them to attend training, his view was that our students shouldn't suffer and the training needed to have been organised such that it would not impact students.

'Going back to the sort of situation last year. There was this sort of financial.... (College B) failed financially so I think a lot of people were thinking why would we want to get involved with them, what's the deal here, what's the benefit, why do we want to get involved with this organisation because it's going to be a drain? What's in it for the College, the Principal, what's the gain because we are all struggling in this world of education where it's bloody tough, people are squeezing you? As soon as that (College B) thing was announced, shortly afterwards, it was made clear that financially the College was no longer as strong as it used to be.' M2CA

It is clear from the aforementioned, that when staff are not clear on the purpose of merger, they resent the change to their working practices or the perceived strength of their institution (Steigenberger, 2016). Notice that this manager not only did not buy into the purpose of merger, she was questioning it from a business benefit perspective on the one hand 'what's the benefit', then moves on to potentially questioning the motives, 'what's the deal here' and clearly struggling to see how it would work for their college (College A) or

why. M2CB talked about the pressure in education, as a sector, and how squeezed everyone was which would then lead to inability to support others.

Resentment can and does impact staff engagement not only with their peers in a damaging way but also with students, employers and other stakeholders (Theron and Dodd, 2011). This, in turn, causes the organisation to become less effective and less successful (Theron and Dodd, 2011), impacting on student success, student experience, student progression and potentially student recruitment. M3CA, in the quote below clearly recognises the need for all staff from both 'campuses' to start to work together and not to be resentful of one another, see quote below.

'I'm at pains to make that quite clear to staff in both campuses to say actually you know I need to break down these barriers with you because you are feeling these resentments but actually it's not the case, it's really not the case'. M3CA

Not acknowledging or underplaying differences between the cultures of the two merging organisations causes more resentment and alienation than cohesion (Kiefer, 2002). Leaders and managers need to invest time in understanding the underlying differences and their causes so that they can plan to align the two organisations into one. Not dealing with issues and leaving them to fester will not help the new organisation thrive and succeed. It is critical for managers to develop three key traits; the first being a more alert emotional intelligence so that they can sense staff frustrations, the second developing channels of communication for staff to vent their frustrations and the third is to deal with such issues sensitively and intelligently. See the example below when a clearly passionate teacher cites an issue that expresses resentment but could and should have been dealt with differently to positive effect.

'So, I've got a page talking about our HND () course and all the things we do, and then underneath it's got 'and at (College B)'...so it's like staffing at (College A) College have got this experience and there's a little thing saying 'and (College B) experience'. It's like, it's like it's kind of like of being forced together and the main introduction relates to us, not (College B) so it's all a bit of a confusing thing...'T3CA

Note the subtlety of T3CA questioning the experience of College B staff to offer the same experience. He is clearly resenting that his work, his knowledge and his experience were being generalised to others. He is keen to maintain a separation and difference. Teachers are generally supportive and sharing, this stance here is more likely to be directed at the

management rather than his peer at College B. There also seems to be something more subtle here; knowledge and information are forms of power and T3CA wasn't agreeing that this power is being dissipated to others without his permission, it was as though he was being violated. The argument that institutions normally use, would have been that the 'knowledge' in question was in the ownership of the college rather than the individual (Intellectual Property) yet, individuals normally do not wish to delve into this subject in detail. The point is not whether it was right or wrong but more about how it had caused resentment for this experienced and clearly passionate member of staff about his subject and his learners. Note that T3CA in the quote, addresses management by using the terms, 'being forced together', he thinks a lot before saying this, so the use of the words 'it's like', repeated three times to give himself time or probably courage to say it. More can be said about how this is 'confusing', in essence he is saying this is not authentic and hence he is resentful. Fake management through action and/or poor communication, deliberately or otherwise, breeds not only mistrust but inability to build the new college in a one team manner that enables the mission to be delivered (Donovan, 2019). This fake approach also jeopardises any good work that might be taking place at any level as fake behaviour and fake communication creates an environment in which it would be difficult to work out what is authentic that can be trusted and what is not. Fake action including communication jeopardises good action as it always takes little to destroy trust but takes a lot to build trust. In the new college, for former College B staff, mistrust becomes the norm following fake action. An alternative approach from managers might have produced an entirely different outcome, so for example, if T3CA was asked to work with his counterpart at College B on the information sheet, they would have developed better levels of understanding and insight into each other's passion for their subject, which would have removed barriers and establishes trust.

Staff from former College B also displayed resentment towards the merger or the Principal/management. In the quote below, a teacher from former College B was at pains to try to be positive, in reference to the Principal following the Principal's briefing, see below.

'I find that quite difficult to do because it was so trying to be positive about what he has done and I know that there is a lot of animosity really about where we are and with the merger from (College B) point of view.....'T3CB

T3CB talks about animosity about the merger, his resentment is more apparent when he spoke about 'so trying to be positive'. He also talks about 'a lot' meaning that he must have spoken about this subject to others and that this view wasn't singular with him.

'The Vice Principal said in my first meeting that everything was done the (College A) way with no thought to some excellent practice that was going on at (College B)'. M1CB

'An ethos of 'you must align to my culture'. M2CB

Another manager talks about (the way the merger was going) as not being painful, in response to another manager during the focus group but frustrating, as below.

'I don't think it's painful, I think it's...Frustrating'. M3CB

Resentment could be seen from all sides so for example, in the Principal's quote below, he talks about 'they didn't do it'. He was resentful and frustrated by it, see below.

'... We came across with a new set of measures and how we would do things particularly to get attendance right, right from the word go and we trained tutors to do that. And then they didn't do it (at College B), they didn't do it at all....' Principal

Of course the Principal was measured but one can sense the frustration and resentment, notice the use of the words 'And then they didn't do it (at College B), they didn't do it at all'. Resentment leads to non-compliance as was evident from the Principal's quote above which leads to further division between staff and managers, hence the need for it not to be left to fester.

To mistrust somebody means that one is not trusting of his or her actions and intentions. There were clear indications of 'mistrust' in the Principal's actions which led to participants' being suspicious of some decisions and some actions being described as intimidating and power grabbing. The dynamics of these complex relationships were multifaceted and whilst on the face of it, better communication might have resolved and clarified the intent of some actions, it seems the issues were deeper than just improvements in communication, though communication is very important clearly. Although the actions were described as having perfectly reasonable explanations, for some of the actions from the leaders' view point, those were not seen as reasonable by managers from former College B, see the exchange below.



'...walking around offices on day 1, power grab....' M1CB

'...sort of wear people down so that they leave voluntarily but it's not a very nice trait is it?' M2CB

'No' M1CB

'Sadly we have lost some great people, we lost our HR Director, she went very quickly'. M3CB

The exchange between managers appears to expose many dynamics at play, amongst which is the mistrust of actions from the Principal. So another issue was the Principal's valuing of professional expertise or more about having an approach to pushing staff out of the organisation by 'wearing people down' (Cartwright and Cooper, 1993). Cartwright and Cooper report that the impact of mistrust in organisations that are going through merger leads to bewilderment and anxiety which would have serious implications for the organisation, its competitiveness and its ability to deliver its mission (Cartwright and Cooper, 2014). This in turn leads to reduced performance and productivity at personal and team level (Marks, Mirvis and Ashkenas, 2014).

Building trust with employees, existing and those newly added to the organisation, in this case through merger, can lead to significant gains for the organisation and for leaders. Wodarczyk (2019) argues that to build trust, leaders must (a) demonstrate self-awareness and an understanding of the emotional impact their actions might have on employees, (b) intentionally build caring relationships with their employees, (c) communicate with truthfulness and clarity, (d) stay grounded in their values and integrate them into their work, and (e) distribute power by collaborating with employees and involving them in high level decision making. So when leaders are mistrusted, even when decisions are seemingly justifiable and reasonable, they will be resented. Trust is the most important resource in any organisation but most importantly amongst staff and between staff and leaders. And once trust is lost, it is really difficult to gain it back. But many times leaders make the mistake of keeping the trust of the senior leadership instead of ensuring the trust of the people they lead. When this happens the SMT becomes more and more distant from the employees with all the problems which ensue, see quote below.

'Well, that's interesting coz actually we said right at the outset we weren't going to do, we deliberately did not have time and therefore we weren't going to, assess whether one system was better than another or even a third system was better than the two we'd got. We said the decisions on that would be pragmatic and we could always revisit them in the future but it was more important that we had one system for finance and one system for data and one system for student tracking and it was which of the systems. So data was a good example, (College B) made a very strong case for saying it should be our system and in the end we said it was a pragmatic decision that said effectively the (College A) College end had twice as many students it was the College A end that...' Principal

The issues pertaining to the quote above were multifaceted; partly about the decision itself, partly about how the decision was arrived at and partly about how the decision-making process was run in terms of who was involved, how it was communicated and so forth. The Principal might have considered the reasoning to be legitimate and convincing as far as he was concerned in two respects; as a pragmatic way forward, and as a legitimate option amongst other possibilities to consider. It is important to note however, the communication of the approach and the reasoning resulted in the 'nuance' being missed from the way it was arrived at, so what staff were left with was the decision not to go with the College B system, even if it was good. What was needed was a more transparent and authentic process, whilst the Principal was reporting that, 'we deliberately did not have time', so it might have seemed to staff that the decision was manipulated to arrive at a specific predetermined outcome. Such approaches achieve little by way of building trust, in fact they achieve exactly the opposite by creating more mistrust. Note in the quote below, how this specific decision was considered by M3CB.

'...so I had tried to argue that we had got the best MIS process here in terms of system, student records, system, how it all fitted together. They had already decided before we merged that that was going to be, they were going to use their finance system and their student system.' M3CB

This quote seems to suggest that the opportunity to argue the case was available but it might not have been genuine enough to enable a transparent decision to be arrived at. M3CB seemed to think this decision had been made before the merger had taken place which leads one to question the purpose of the argument that was offered which might have seemed disingenuous.

T1CB reported what might seem to be a disturbing approach to stifling openness and trust, see quote below.

'Did you see those asking complicated questions at the last presentation had their photos taken?' T1CB

It might have been entirely innocent and conceivable that the photos were taken by the photographer to reflect the event and hence photographs were taken of those members of staff as they asked questions, however, this comment demonstrates the level of mistrust and anxiety that existed at the time of the study.

### **5.2.3 Lack of Recognition of Professional Expertise**

There was also evidence of lack of recognition of professional expertise that threatens the professional identity of practitioners which in turn leads to considerable staffing issues. These issues can range from staff leaving the organisation, not participating in college-wide initiatives, speaking ill of the College to key stakeholders such as students and employers, non-compliance with systems and processes and many other issues (Schein, 2010). The exchange below demonstrates how managers from former College B experienced this lack of recognition of their, and their colleagues', expertise.

'The Vice Principal said in my first meeting that everything was done the (College A) way with no thought to some excellent practice that was going on at (College B)' M1CB

'...so I had tried to argue that we had got the best MIS process here in terms of system, student records, system, how it all fitted together. They had already decided before we merged that that was going to be, they were going to use their finance system and their student system.' M3CB

So from the perspective of College B managers, they did not have the opportunity to demonstrate their professional expertise to show they had a lot to contribute and could not 'protect' their staff nor could they be part of the decision making in a meaningful way, note the use of the words 'They had already decided before we merged'. Yet from the perspective of the Principal, there was a nuance between what was negotiable and what was not negotiable in terms of willingness to adapt and change. The issue here is who is expected to change and who doesn't have to change, see the quote below:

'...the three things we said that were almost not negotiable for us were the (College A) approach to Finance, to Marketing and to Quality...would be adopted wholesale ....' Principal

The emotional impact of the way these decisions were taken and communicated led to staff, in this example, losing faith and mistrusting their leaders, which led to many staff either disengaging with the organisational goals & mission, or leaving the organisation. The professional impact was equally damaging, leading to disengagement from the organisation, note the use of the words 'they were going', which implies a detachment from the collective of the college for M3CB above. It seems from the quotes that the Principal was expecting staff to be receptive to change yet it seems, it hadn't occurred to him, during the interview at least, that it might have been him who also needed to change.

Change, whether it be perceived or real, can feel like one's professional expertise is not being recognised; for example, when a member of staff was being told to change the way they did something only because it was different from the way the manager expected it should be done. Staff might not resent change if the reason for this change is explained to them and are given the opportunity to discuss the change and potentially how their way might work better. Every one of us is protective of their professional expertise, especially in our work setting. To have one's professional expertise not recognised or dismissed, profoundly damages our professional standing and impacts one's professional identity (Sachs, 2001). (Wenger, 1999) argues that teachers' professional identities are rich and complex because they are produced in a rich and complex set of relations of practice. This perspective is important as this richness and complexity are highly valued by teachers as part of their professional identities as it reflects their lived experiences and their value systems (Sachs, 2001).

Participating managers from former College B resented the dismissive approach to their professional expertise and their judgement, even when it had been externally validated. These feelings impact individuals' sense of value.

Participants from former College B, saw that some of their colleagues were being 'pushed' and not valued so that they would leave the college, in a devious plan to get people to go without being made redundant. This was seen as not good for culture and trust in the leadership and potentially dangerous, especially if unintended, see quote below.

'...sort of wear people down so that they leave voluntarily but it's not a very nice trait is it?'  
M2CB

To be valued by ones' peers, colleagues, leaders and managers is a critical contributory factor to emotional and organisational wellbeing. Staff need to be valued to work productively and effectively (Cartwright and Cooper, 2014; Schein, 2014). Dutton, Debebe and Wrzesniewski (2012) argue that being valued forms a 'critical psychological bridge' through which employees feel and experience their connection to their work. The Principal felt that he was taking people with him on a journey to merge the two organisations. From his perspective, he valued the contribution of College A staff, his former college.

'.....particularly I think those human things around openness and honesty and respect, they were things we could pick up from visits to the College..' Principal

The above quote demonstrates that the Principal was mindful of the human factors of respecting staff, and being open and honest with them. He clearly recognised those 'human things' as important. Yet, somehow, that was not the lived experience of the participants in the study. For example, truly dedicated managers from College B spoke about the little respect they were given. M3CB spoke about use of data but no opportunity to have dialogue about the objectivity or meaning of data, 'A rather blind it's this way or no way', supported by M1&2CB, see exchange below.

'So no kind of objective measure of looking to see where have got strengths and weaknesses. A rather blind it's this way or no way'. M3CB

'They were the givens' M2CB

'Right' M1CB

The affirmation from M3CB's colleagues reflects that 'not being valued' was not isolated but reflects a lived experience for all of them.

' (Principal) has stated the culture of (College A) and appears happy for (College B) staff to leave if they do not like it.' T6CB

The quote from T6CB above demonstrates the point openly and unequivocally. Even examples of decisions that could have been rationalised and communicated as

demonstrations of recognition to add value such as maintaining the brand of former College B in its locality, it seems was missed. It was only communicated as a business decision so that the community wasn't confused by a new brand.

Resentment and mistrust help develop a deeper insight into how the emotional wellbeing of staff is affected by management decisions, management conduct, communication, language and pace of merger. This deep insight should enable more effective management to achieve merger success.

Chapters 4 and 5 have detailed a view of the two colleges as described by the participants. Participants talked about the impact of the merger in their wellbeing and their sense of trust in their leaders. In Chapter 6, I will explore the relevance, significance and meanings of findings to answer the research question.

# Chapter 6 Discussion

## 6.1 Introduction

'There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.'

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1469- 1527 (quoted in Daley, Orr and Petrie, 2017)

This quote illustrates that the recognition of difficulties when making significant change originates way back in history and continues to be a leadership challenge today in all sectors and segments of society. Likewise, merging two or more organisations is a process of significant change (Buono, Bowditch and Lewis, 1985; Kotter, 1996). Further Education college mergers, in England, are common-place and are becoming more frequent due, in the main, to Government policy and funding pressures (Burke, no date; Elliott, 2016) as shown in section 2.2.1.

This case study was concerned with organisational culture integration when two GFEC, in England, merged. The aims were to explore the lived experiences of key internal stakeholders such as teachers, middle and senior managers and leaders. To develop a deeper understanding of how members of staff were affected by the merger experience as the literature suggested, it should be recognised that people matters were the key determinant for merger success (Williams, Roberts and Shires, 2019). Cartwright and Cooper (1994) posit that the human side of merger can impact staff emotional wellbeing, engagement, anxiety and trust profoundly. The study also aimed to delve deep into what it is that drives leadership professional practice and hence merger management in GFEC.

This chapter aims to discuss the relatedness between merger process and 'people matters' such as staff emotional wellbeing, trust and organisational culture.

Data reported in Chapters 4 and 5 show that College A was the dominant college in every way. It follows that the power relationship between the two colleges was imbalanced.

Knippenberg *et al.* (2002) argue that key initial decisions on the management of merger will have long lasting ramifications on staff morale, and the sense of belonging and trust. The ramification of the sense of takeover will be discussed in detail in this chapter. This chapter needs to be viewed with this key finding as the underlying context for this merger. In developing this argument, the chapter discusses important matters such as whether the experience of stakeholders lent itself to it being described as a merger or as a takeover. The chapter discusses how the merger process was managed, the impact of the pace of the merger, the way communication was managed including the use of language, decisions about the management structure and how they impacted peoples' lived experiences. The chapter also discusses, in detail, how the aforementioned impacted staff morale, emotional wellbeing and trust in leadership.

This chapter concludes by making three fundamental arguments. The first is the relatedness of key merger processes, leadership decision making and communication on staff emotional wellbeing, organisational culture, morale and trust in leadership. The second is that the neoliberal performativity policy framework for FE have created an environment that held FE back from achieving its goals of social justice and social mobility by shifting the attention from people matters to transactional processes and marketisation. Thirdly, leadership teams are not part of the policy making environment but rather are subjected to it and are battered by it, just like other members of staff in the FE sector, which contradicts the academic literature on activism by academics (Dennis, 2016; Mycroft and Weatherby, 2017).

## **6.2 Neoliberal Managerialism in Action**

The findings which were detailed in Chapters 4 and 5 present a narrative of largely effective transactional management of the merger process. This study found that leaders were mostly concerned with ensuring that systems, processes and structures were completed. In line with merger guidance reported in section 2.6, leaders and managers focussed on ensuring that merger due diligence was conducted on time and that an organisation structure was ready and rolled out ahead of the new term. This way of addressing the merger process concurs with findings of other researchers in the literature (see Armstrong, 2011;



Steigenberger, 2016; Williams, Roberts and Shires, 2019). However, this study also found that people's matters did not feature in a pronounced manner in terms of leaders' management action, again concurring with the academic literature. Williams, Roberts and Shires (2019), for example, argue that during mergers much of the focus of activity occurs at the policy and procedure level, even though differences in organisational culture are those which present the greatest challenge going forward. The ESFA viewed this merger as a success which confirms that the view of policy-maker's lacked a sufficiently sophisticated insight of what makes a merged college successful and sustainable for the future. The view of merger success from policy makers relating to transactional aspects such as legal, asset and finance, are consistent with the literature (Wyngaard and Kapp, 2004). It is also consistent with FE policy guidance on mergers (BIS, 2015). It follows that as far as leaders were concerned, as reported in Chapter 4, the management of this merger was efficient, successful and effective. This is consistent with the literature (Buono and Bowditch, 2003; Williams, Roberts and Shires, 2019). One wonders whether it is the influence of business school dated theories that influence policy making and policy makers' view of the world in UK FE or is it that they are ideologically unwilling to change their view in the face of evidence. In this regard, there are two fundamental questions; the first is what drives leadership professional practice, specifically, is it policy, and the other is, what drives policy in FE?

The Principal and senior leaders who managed the merger process, felt the two colleges merged on the target date in 2017 with no technical issues, it was successful. The new college did indeed start the new term on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2017, following the merger, with a management structure with all the posts filled and ready to start operational management. The college leadership's approach to the merger is consistent with the literature (Ghoshal, 2005; Pfeffer, 2005) where the leadership team follow dated leadership and management theories that focus on performativity and managerialism and not much on emotional wellbeing and engagement with staff. The Principal's practice reflects Kotter (1996), whether it be knowingly or unknowingly. Burnes, Hughes and By (2016) made the point that these theories were discredited and that they were mere myths in which leadership change literature was trapped.

Yet, not all involved in the merger agreed that the merger was well managed, and that decision making was appropriate. Staff, for example, considered the management of the merger, and particularly its pace, to be a concern and subsequently a cause for considerable unease and anxiety. Likewise, many of the decisions on systems and processes, such as the finance and student record systems, were felt to have been rushed. The issue of not expending sufficient time to understand staff concerns and to explain the rationale for these decisions in line with the values of staff and the mission of the institution, resulted in choices not being convincing and feeling rushed. The alternative, as detailed in the findings, has led to initiation of distrust in leadership and culture misalignment which is consistent with the literature (Buono, Bowditch and Lewis, 1985). For example, Hollmann, Carpes and Beuron (2010) detail vividly in their study of the Daimler-Chrysler merger, how such decisions led to culture clashes that ultimately resulted in merger failure at a considerable human and financial cost. The point is that explaining the rationale for decisions and displaying humility in merger situations is critically important for building trust with staff (Hollmann, Carpes and Beuron, 2010; Cheng and Seeger, 2012; Gleibs *et al.*, 2013; Razi and Garrick, 2019).

However, O'Leary (2015) argues that Ofsted, the education regulator, and employers rely on observations to measure competence and to performance manage teachers. This is a useful example to demonstrate how Ofsted represents the role of external accountability (auditing) in neoliberalism. It is entirely possible that Ofsted's judgements of College B had contributed to or might have caused the low morale and low self-esteem which has led to College B becoming vulnerable and its eventual downfall. Another point to note is that to include Ofsted and employers together might be taking a simplistic view of the relationship between Ofsted, teachers and employers. The relationship is far from straightforward. A more sophisticated argument might rationalise the relationship differently and suggest that employers (referring to college and other providers of education who are subject to Ofsted) are subjected to the same pressures and measures as teachers by Ofsted (Page, 2017). In fact, (O'Leary, 2015) himself argued this point later in the same chapter when he posited that graded lesson observation (an example of policy) quickly became the key feature of quality measurement in colleges following Ofsted's policy on observations, so as not to draw unwanted attention by not falling inline and are not following Ofsted's quality assurance mechanisms.

The question that is acutely appropriate to consider is whether leadership in GFEC needs to chart its own unique discourse or is it just like any other field of business? Does GFEC's leadership discourse need to be rooted into the value system of GFEC and goals centred into its mission and purpose for existence? Alternatively, is marketisation and competition the right way for the UK to become a first-class nation when it comes to vocational education and training (VET) policy? Should FE's leadership objectives be meaningfully focused on people and their values to affect community cohesion, social mobility and social justice, as well as important matters like economic prosperity and productivity, or are performativity and the supply of skills enough? These points are important for leaders and for policy makers. Leaders need to develop sufficiently sophisticated abilities to critique theories and assess their applicability to their own local FE context. This might mean utilising a combination of perspectives rather than merely reaching to a bestselling book on change management, if at all. Leadership in FE needs to consider the importance of having its distinct voice so that it has the means to challenge policy. GFEC leadership must chart its unique, FE specific, leadership discourse, as is the case for vocational pedagogy and the construction of FE teachers' dual identity, which is consistent with the academic literature as promoted by academics such as Barnett (2006) and Hanley *et al.* (2018). The FE policy making domain, for far too long, has omitted the need for a pronounced FE voice and it is my contention that FE policy making is weak due, in part, to this omission.

In the remainder of this section a discussion of important matters such as leadership decision-making and the management structure are presented. These examples help demonstrate the impact on staff morale, respect and sense of value.

### **6.2.1 Leadership-Followership Continuum**

The account of the Principal, during the interview, stated that operational matters such as organisation structure, processes and systems were the highest priority in terms of readiness to start the new term in September, following the enactment of the merger. One of the challenges in any management change process, as was the case in merger, was the business continuity; in this case the College continuing to recruit and teach learners. Hence

the Principal wanted to achieve organisational clarity and stability with a new structure in place in-line with the academic literature (Kotter, 1996). Leaders were conscious of this and acted upon it as a high priority in accordance with the literature and common leadership practice.

However, the issue was not that business continuity was unimportant or that it was not a priority, indeed it was. However, it should not be at the expense of a more sophisticated and in-depth consideration of matters that really affect business continuity beyond transactional aspects. Matters such as staff morale, emotional wellbeing and a sense of respect were far more important than the transactional aspects, although these were still recognised as being significant. That is to say, the point here was to afford 'people matters' the attention and sophistication they deserved. The logic was that FE dealt with people and hence when staff interacted with learners, they needed to be offering respect and support that they, in turn, experienced from their leaders. Staff needed to have the level of morale and respect that allowed them to function within a system that was aligned to their values and purpose. This contention further strengthens the argument for FE specific leadership discourse steeped into the FE value system and oriented towards achieving a mission for social justice and social cohesion. It is important to note that while the literature focused only on the rationale for merging, in reality to ensure the staff buy-in would involve providing a whole series of rationale and justifications for decisions. This way, leaders ensure that staff were not left behind and that staff move along a journey of discovery and trust building.

Burnes, Hughes and By (2016) argued that leaders needed to understand followership, and hence be able to influence and impact more effectively. In this context, it was important for leaders to understand and be able to navigate power dynamics, trust, followership to lead and manage change effectively (Burnes, Hughes and By, 2016). Followership is sometimes defined as the other side of leadership; it is the willingness to cooperate for the accomplishment of the group mission (Northouse, 2018). The criticality here was for leaders to understand and behave in ways that enabled others to trust and follow leaders. So far in this chapter, it has been clear that there have been many alienated followers (Northouse, 2018), out of the participant group.

### 6.2.2 Merger or Takeover?

Staff were faced with a new structure with the whole of the management team slotted in on day one, as they came back from their summer leave ready to start the new term. The way managers were selected gave an impression of a takeover from former College A and that the College A way would prevail. One of the important nuances to any management restructure is the fairness and the openness of the selection process, for example, in a merger situation which former college the highest proportion of managers came from. In the case of this merger, the senior and middle management teams were made up of 35 members of whom three were from former College B and the rest were all from former College A. Some former College A members were promoted just before the merger so that they qualified for their new positions, see section 4.5. Interestingly, the merger was enacted during the staff summer break and it was as though the fate of the staff, their institution and its future needed not be of concern to them. The managers from former College B were not afforded an equal chance as their counterparts from former College A in the new structure. It sent a message, intentionally or unintentionally, that the professional expertise of managers from former College B was not recognised or not valued. It was a message that former College B would report to College A managers, in effect a takeover, see section 4.6. It created distrust as it signified an early message that what was said about culture and working together ahead of the merger, as was detailed in section 4.5, was potentially a courting phase and that the current experience might represent the reality of the merger.

The academic literature supports the contention that such decisions have significant impact on employee morale, sense of fairness and ultimately trust (Gleibs *et al.*, 2013; Razi and Garrick, 2019). The evidence from this study was that this action was intentional as the Principal indicated that the managers needed to be predominantly from College A so as not to 'change things'. It was also evident that these decisions were intentional as when the Principal cited the issue of compliance in former College B, he said that the issue was not picked up because the Director was a former College B manager and that their way of doing things (code for culture) was different. This point supports the contention about the divide between faculty and management in the academic literature (Mansour, Heath and Brannan, 2015).

In this merger, the lived experiences of former College A staff and that of former College B staff were fundamentally different. It follows that the experiences for staff of the new college were shaped by the dichotomy between what they had expected before the merger, and what they actually experienced. There was dissonance between expectations and reality for former College B staff as they were presented with the structure on the first day without the opportunity to discuss, negotiate, participate or indeed take part in any selection process. This experience represented a tangible manifestation of lack of recognition of skills and expertise which had contributed to distrust in leadership, a sense of anxiety and helplessness on the part of staff from former College B. It also indicated to managers from former College B that they were not valued. This situation was consistent with merger and change management literature in detailing issues on the impact of poor decision making on staff buy-in (Buono, Bowditch and Lewis, 1985; Burke, 2017).

Appointments to the new management structure were consistent with the academic literature that outline one of the key pitfalls for leaders during merger where they do not prioritise equity and transparency between staff to build trust over speed of implementation (Armstrong, 2011; Williams, Roberts and Shires, 2019). As already pointed out, Armstrong (2011) further argued that leaders' focus on transactional processes during merger at the expense of building trust was misplaced and risked the future success of merger. In the case of this merger, while the need/aim to seek organisational clarity, section 4.5 was not misplaced as a plan in itself, taking enough care of 'people matters' along the way was not as well planned. Theron and Dodd (2011) indeed make the very point that while staff, in merger cases, are preoccupied with structure and whom they will be reporting to post-merger, recognising the need for fairness, honesty and transparency was the overriding preoccupation for staff in building trust in their leaders (Sharif and Scandura, 2014). Sharif and Scandura, (2014) further suggested that leaders' primary driver should be to act and conduct themselves in ways that build trust and demonstrate fairness. That was not the situation in this case study.

### 6.3 Communication and Use of Language

This study found that in this case communication was not well managed ahead, during or after merger. It seems, the Principal had a simplistic approach to communication as supported by his indication during the interview that they utilised their old ways of communication prior to the merger but this did not work. There were manifestations of lack of managed communication through inconsistency of message on aspects such as the new structure, rationale for merger and so on. It is possible that the Principal, and the senior team, did not have the skills within the institution to manage pre and post-merger communication effectively and authentically, including choice of words. So for example, when one of the managers was told as he challenged a decision, 'you are not strategic....', he said it in a cynical way, which concurs with the literature, Bang and Reio Jr, (2017), this caused this manager to be seriously demotivated and undervalued. He should have been recognised for caring for the College and its learning by potentially pointing out matters of concern. This reflected either a simplistic approach to communication or more of a sinister approach designed to push some staff to leave, as was reported by some participants; either way such an approach to communication does not help deliver a successful merger.

This study has demonstrated that communication had an important impact on the cultural integration of the two colleges. Some of the decisions on communication impacted on employee morale, specifically employee wellbeing in relation to trust and distrust in merger situations. In accordance with the academic literature, it is suggested that communication is one of the most important activities that needs careful and thoughtful planning for merger success (Clemente and Greenspan, 1998; Steigenberger, 2016). It is clear that communication needed to be highly sensitive to the organisational context (Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001; Ganta and Manukonda, 2014). Goldberg and Srivastava (2017) stipulate that language is a useful window to understand organisational culture and hence it follows that a sensitive and sophisticated approach to communication and the use of language can impact culture and post-merger integration profoundly.

One important and relevant example was the way in which the rationale for this merger was articulated for the different constituents of staff, as discussed in detail in section 4.5.

Another important example in enabling a critical examination of how communication was

managed was demonstrated when the Principal, as reported in section 4.5.2, commented to all staff on past former College B failures. The Principal communicated the issue of non-payment of invoices on time as an example to convince staff, from former College B, that their college was a failure. He, in this example, had made a choice about the message and the supporting evidence to back up his claim. His choice would have alienated many of his new staff. The issue, it seems, for the manager who spoke about this matter during the focus group session, was not whether the college had indeed paid the invoices on time or not but that it was more complex and multifaceted. Was it that the Principal was searching for a negative point about College B to publicise? Was it that the choice of this as an example reflected a more nuanced and deeper issue for this manager in nonalignment of purpose with the Principal? Was the non-payment of invoices as central to the working of the college as the learning and progression of learners? Was it that all staff in College B were being held accountable for the actions of the finance team and potentially the former leadership team? How central to the mission of the college was the timely payment of invoices? For the Principal to identify an issue in a general staff briefing, it needed to be central to the mission of the college. The Principal could, if he had wished, taken the issue of timely payment of invoices up with the finance team but he chose to address the whole of the staff with it. That is to say, an issue more relevant to the mission of the college, how well it delivers to its learners and its community, would have been more important and more meaningful. Communication and the use of language, in this instance, would have contributed to distrust in the Principal as he had demonstrated to his new staff through this statement that he cared less about their learners and their wellbeing than delaying the payment of an invoice (Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001; Illes and Mathews, 2015).

### **6.3.1 Rationale for Merger**

When the Principal articulated the rationale, sometimes called motivation for merger in the literature, (see, for example, Bradley and Capuccinello, 2016), it seems that he told staff in College A something that was different from College B, reported in section 4.5 . Where the leader's communication approach might have been simplistic in telling one group of staff what they wanted to hear and the other group what they wanted to hear, this caused a crisis of trust in leadership and a sense of quandary for staff as they were not being



respected and hence not being told the truth (Van Den Heuvel *et al.*, 2016; Donovan, 2019). In FE, and broadly in education, staff are motivated by the alignment of their work to their values (Elliott and Crossley, 1997; Finlay and Finnie, 2002). So framing decisions and changes, including mergers, in line with staff values and the mission of the institution, is important for staff buy-in. In this case, senior leaders told former College A staff, ahead of the merger, that the purpose was to help College B improve as detailed in section 5.2.2. However, they told College B staff that they wanted the two colleges to work together to bring about improvements to the local area and its learners, almost exactly as reported in the literature by Stewart (2003).

The evidence from this research shows that, contrary to the recommendation above, the motivation for merger was not clarified sufficiently robustly to enable staff to buy into it. Participants' own understanding of the rationale for this merger ranged from, some College A participants questioning the rationale itself in regard to merging with a failing college, to some thinking decisions were being imposed by Government, shorthand for FE Commissioner. It is important to note that participants from former College B, spoke about the reason as being due to their college being judged inadequate and had financial notice to improve.

The evidence gives credence to the possibility that the rationale for merger was not clarified with sufficient specificity before being shared consistently across both former colleges prior to the merger. For this reason, participants reported differing motivations for the merger which reflected ambiguity, lack of certainty and has had a negative impact on their morale. Such early interactions with the leadership team and the Principal specifically were used as opportunities by staff to help them work out how much to trust in their leadership and how much alignment there was with their own values. Stewart (2003) argues in this regard that FE college merger motives are mostly framed in a very broad and general manner, such as, that 'merger is better for local people' or 'better for FE provision'. These justifications are far too broad and difficult for employees to make sense of. Thus, the motivation for merger needed to be framed in meaningful ways that relate to organisational mission and values of the institution (Cartwright and Cooper, 1996). Alternatively, there was probability that the Principal, in this regard, was not authentic in sharing the rationale for merger so he would have told each group a different rationale see section 4.5.2. The academic literature is

conclusive on the criticality of having authentic, clear and well considered motivation for merger as opposed to having a broad, generic or inconsistent rationale (Armstrong, 2011; Elliott, 2016).

In this chapter, so far, the discussion has focussed on recognising the difference in organisational culture and locating the leadership discourse in the performativity neoliberal policy environment which governs GFEC. This chapter also explored the localised leadership discourse and learned that the pace of merger change, presenting staff with a ready management structure with all the posts filled on day 1, caused significant issues of trust. Communication and the use of language were discussed and how they impact morale, trust and the need for authenticity and consistency of message. It is important to recognise the need for communication to have a carefully planned and dedicated timeline that should aim to achieve certain goals on aligning different aspects of organisational culture over a different timeline to the legal enactment of the merger (Fubini, Price and Zollo, 2007). The rationale for merger was also discussed in terms of clarity of purpose, specificity and consistency of message. In the remainder of this chapter the relatedness of the areas that have already been covered will be discussed to enable a clear appreciation of their impact on staff morale, their emotional wellbeing and their trust in their leaders.

#### **6.4 Differences in Organisational Culture**

The construct of organisational culture in GFEC is worthy of erudite investigation due to the competing pressures of demand and function (Anderson, 2007). This research found that organisational culture differences existed between both former colleges. Participants recognised these differences and articulated these differences openly, as reported in Chapters 4&5. It seems the Principal also knew what culture was, as the points he made about openness, honesty, respect and the way they (Colleges A and B) did things were correct as elements of culture (Schein, 1985; Hofstede, 2001). This leads us to posit that there was clarity on behalf of the Principal on the difference in culture and also an understanding of what culture was.

As part of this difference, it is suggested that there was a fundamental variance in approach to management between the two former colleges, namely there being performativity culture in former College A and not being so in former College B. This proposition is supported by evidence from both former colleges reported in section 5.2.1. One would assume from the comment from the Principal about the Director from College B that her issues were due to the culture of College B rather than a competence issue. This is because the Principal was not intimating that she was incompetent as she had been promoted recently, as part of the new management structure. This suggests that the Principal recognised the difference between managers, including middle and senior managers' approach to management, performativity and compliance.

These discussions are important because organisational cultural differences will not disappear by themselves and need purposeful and methodical planning. The literature details rich and comprehensive, methodical ways to enable organisational cultural integration (Schein, 1985, 2010; Steen, 2015; Sarala, Vaara and Junni, 2017), for example, the initiation of joint projects, taking care of sensitive and intelligent internal communication, having an open and transparent process for recruitment to the new management structure and so forth. It is important to be mindful of Elliott's (1996) contention for the invisibility of FE research and its limited impact on professional practice.

#### **6.4.1 Organisational Culture Integration**

As detailed in section *Them and Us Culture*, the Principal was clear on not wanting to change the culture in College A. The leadership team also promoted the 'College A way' as their strategy for constructing the new college. The alignment between the Chair and the Principal reflects that 'the College A way' was a strategically important defining feature of this merger. The purpose it seems, for adopting this approach was to send a message of acknowledgement to College A staff of their expertise and superior practice as detailed in *Resentment & Mistrust*. When participants discussed management changes to systems and processes, they mentioned the 'College A way' as having been promoted by College A's

leaders as the way forward for the newly merged college sections 4.5 and 5.2.1. In line with the findings of By, Diefenbach and Klarner (2008)

participants' introspection clearly identified this as a major demotivating issue for almost all teachers and managers from former College B. Such ill thought-out propositions have a significant impact on morale. It is important to note that participating teachers from College A did not consider that the manner in which College A went about the implementation was appropriate to create a successful unified college, see section 4.6. This in turn would indicate that it is not a motivating factor for at least some of College A teachers either. The position of participants from College A on the 'College A way' reflects a nuance about staff in GFEC being more value driven as opposed to 'what is in it for me' as a motivator, as evidenced in the literature (Finlay and Finnie, 2002).

It is argued that there was not a sufficiently sophisticated and deliberate plan for the two cultures to align through leadership and management action save the College A way. This argument agrees with the literature in the lack of insight of leaders' into cultural integration during merger and the preoccupation with transactional process aspects of merger (Williams, Roberts and Shires, 2019). However, there was a nuance to this lack of insight in that this study found that the Principal might have understood what culture was but, it seems, that he did not have a sufficiently sophisticated approach to organisational culture integration. An alternative consideration was that the Principal might have considered the options between choosing one of the two old organisational cultures as opposed to creating a new organisational culture through a sophisticated change journey. If so, would staff from former College A see this as a strength or weakness? Which culture would the leader align themselves to? The evidence from this research was that it was more prudent for leaders to align cultures as it would have helped the emotional wellbeing of staff and hence encourage better engagement and commitment.

The literature draws a distinction between the values driven employee in GFEC and the values of leaders and managers in GFEC being competitive and ideologically part of the marketisation and performativity driven policy framework (Simmons, 2010). This distinction in assumptions and values led academics to allude to questioning the assumptions about unified GFEC culture, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter (Anderson, 2007). Mansour, Heath and Brannan (2015) support the contention that there is a lack of trust between academics and managers in HE, a sector that shares much of its

organisational culture and values with FE. However, the evidence from this study does not support this proposition, at least, not as a way of being for this leader in FE. The evidence points to the Principal not having a sufficiently deep and sophisticated understanding of how organisational culture integration can be managed. When discussing the importance of organisational culture integration during the interview, the Principal spoke about how important it was and how it occupied the thinking of the leadership team. So for example, when the Principal suggested (section 4.5.2) that he had underestimated the sensitivity of people in former College B, it shows that he might have taken a shallow view of the importance of organisational culture. The Principal didn't see the fragility and the impact of 'people matters' during his briefings to staff. He was, it seems, dispassionately sharing failures of former College B with an expectation that people should receive them with objectivity and no emotions.

It was possible that what the Principal described was an expression of 'on-stage' behaviour as described by Klára BAKÓ (2010) and equally possible that he had a superficial approach to organisational culture integration. The issue is that fragile staff who do not feel valued and respected will not perform well and hence the cycle of failure will not be broken, contrary to the Principal's wishes to achieve better outcomes for their learners. This is supported by the college merger literature (Weber and Camerer, 2003; Razi and Garrick, 2019).

#### **6.4.2 Emotional Wellbeing**

Emotional wellbeing is a critically important and multifaceted aspect of how well any significant organisational change is managed (Cartwright and Cooper, 2009; López-Domínguez *et al.*, 2013). It affects morale, not just for individuals but also impacts others such as peers, students, external stakeholders, in profound and multidimensional ways (Cartwright and Cooper, 2014). Managers from former College B clearly articulated (section 5.2) how their own emotional wellbeing and fragility were affected by the merger. Emotional wellbeing is nuanced in that it is affected by decisions, communication and language, and how certain aspects of management conduct are perceived and hence related strongly to aspects discussed in chapters 4 and 5. For example, the rationale for merger or the

decisions, timing and communication of the newly merged college management structure would have impacted the emotional wellbeing, feeling valued and fragility of staff considerably. For this reason, process matters which are discussed in chapters 4 are inextricably linked to 'people matters' that were discussed in chapter 5.

One particularly powerful display of emotion was when former College B managers, section 5.2 reported that they felt they had a duty to protect the staff they line managed. They were displaying not only their own fragility and demotivation and hence impacting their own morale, but also the need for them to be strong and to protect others which put immense emotional pressure on them. This point serves as a powerful piece of evidence to support notions in the academic literature that staff in GFEC are value driven as discussed earlier (Elliott and Crossley, 1997; Finlay and Finnie, 2002).

In the analysis of the ways in which the Principal conducted himself amongst his new staff, it seems that he was not receptive to challenge as in section 5.2. So, following a challenge from a manager regarding the way the merger was being managed, the response was that 'you are operational not strategic', which reflects an attitude that might not have been open to challenge or even willingness to explain the rationale for decisions. Such responses potentially reflect an inability to deal with challenge based on sound judgement and robust evidence but more from an arrogant and dismissive position which is not only demotivating but also reflects weaknesses of senior leadership and potentially causing more damage than good for the college. This potentially indicates unwillingness from the Principal to listen to difficult or uncomfortable messages *from* staff, even though he was clearly happy to deliver these uncomfortable messages *to* staff, section 5.2 and so when the Principal described staff as 'lashing out', they might have been challenging him on some of the information that had been given. Another example that reflects a complex set of sentiments was when members of staff clapped when a question was posed in a public presentation. The question might have been indicative of a hostile culture in which one was watched if they challenge or ask the Principal a difficult question pertaining to his judgement or decision-making. In this respect, staff clapped the questioner for asking the question; it was as though they felt unable to ask the question or was it that something needed to be said and it was framed as a question, a way of speaking truth to power (Grenier, 2019)? Foucault's work on

governmentality offers a useful perspective on resistance as he suggests that 'Where there is power, there is resistance' (Lemke, 2002).

Grenier (2019) argues that speaking truth to power needs to form a pronounced aspect to human resource management in education and other public sector fields to enable education to play its full part and to resist commercialisation and marketisation for the public good. Peseta (2014) argues that educators have a responsibility to speak truth to power towards policy makers. It is possible that the organisational culture, as experienced by these staff, might be oppressive with no or limited opportunity for professional challenge. Was the organisational culture in the college such that staff didn't feel able to speak openly? There was evidence from College B teachers related to 'asking complicated questions during presentations having their photos taken'. This shows a level of distrust and anxiety about asking questions and being perceived as somebody who asks 'complicated questions', and potentially labelled as a trouble-maker, all of which undermines staff and leads to emotional pressures. If staff were labelled as such and made to leave by indirectly making their lives difficult, the college over time, might end up losing some highly talented and committed staff only because they were not being handled in a respectful or trusted manner. This behaviour risks creating an education institution that is incapable of addressing challenges in an appropriate manner which in turn makes the institution only receptive to those who don't ask or don't challenge and creates a 'do as you are told' culture. The risks in such behaviour can threaten the whole of the merger as it does not enable practitioners to thrive and develop in the way one would expect so that they are able to fulfil their role as educators (Anderson and Cohen, 2015). An educator does-not only emanate knowledge pertaining to technical skills but also develops learners as rounded individuals, enabling them to learn independently and to be confident about challenging and being challenged (Crabbe *et al.*, 2015).

It is not possible to identify, from the available evidence, why the two managers felt this way and the third did not trust the Principal. It is however possible to put forward that managers who were able to make such assertions were those who might have worked closer to the Principal in terms of their working patterns, so perhaps they met with the Principal more often, to work on specific projects. This was certainly the case for M2CB (section 5.2), as it indicates that these decisions were made with 'the best of intentions'.



The implication was that those staff who worked closely with the Principal had more trust in his intentions which equally infers that managers who didn't interact often with him had lower trust in his actions. The key points here were to note the importance of effective, multi-channel and authentic communication to fill the void between the Principal and staff and for the Principal to be sensitive to the way messages and changes impact the emotional wellbeing of staff.

One can see how successful and empathetic management can help remove barriers and create a successful working culture. Note that T6CB had exactly the same working conditions as the other teachers but felt differently because she had a manager who 'took the time', 'organised a visit', she and her colleagues were received by the staff from former College A and they were 'nice', they showed them round. All of which are normal human behaviours, 'people matters'. What is clear from T6CB perspective is that when the manager knew what to do with regard to emotional wellbeing and prioritised these people matters, it made a great deal of difference. However, this was not the norm for the rest of the participants. This example demonstrates that emotional wellbeing is complex, very important and yet not paid sufficient attention in merger management practice. It is possible to consider emotional wellbeing as the consequence of complex contextual decisions and the way in which these decisions were dealt with. It seems that clearly this has to do with the quality and effectiveness of the communication. In this sense communication is not only the diktat from the senior management, but also the 1-2-1 communication. It is about how things are communicated, how the rationale for decisions is disseminated and the 'what' is being communicated and the underlying context which filters the meaning of the message which is communicated.

Minimising the negative impact on staff emotional wellbeing, as far as possible, needs to be a key leadership and management concern (Cartwright and Cooper, 1994). Leaders and managers need to learn more about 'the human' factors and be willing to invest more in such expertise so as they are able to consider carefully how the merger process needs to be conducted to protect the emotional wellbeing of staff. Participants had legitimate concerns about the way staff were being recognised, consulted and respected. In the following section, key themes which contribute to the emotional wellbeing of staff are described.

### 6.4.3 Trust in Leadership

Trust, in this thesis, refers to staff buying into the vision of their leadership team and hence support change, have confidence in decisions and comply with these decisions. Trust is important as staff do not have all the information that might help them agree or disagree with decisions. Trust is built and earned through action and a mediating sense of vulnerability on behalf of leaders (Donovan, 2019). The Principal argued that the human things around openness, honesty and respect were the guiding values for the two former colleges (section 5.2.3). These are important aspects in building trust and hence employee engagement, belonging and emotional wellbeing (Cartwright and Cooper, 2014; Donovan, 2019).

However, the actions of the Principal had created a level of distrust in the intentions of the leadership team, whether they were going to keep their promises and how they would conduct themselves going forward. Armstrong (2011) posits that during merger, one of the cornerstones for leaders was the demonstration of fairness and equity towards followers. This needs to be considered against a backdrop where the Principal spoke about culture and support to staff of former College B ahead of the merger. This action however caused morale to be depressed, gave a sense of injustice, as detailed following the appointments to the new management structure. For example, one of the College B managers put it as, 'we weren't going to have a look in' and the other manager said that the structure changed within two weeks between when it was agreed and when it was enacted (section 4.5.1).

These findings agree with the literature in recognising the need to have total alignment between what is promised and what is delivered and/or experienced ahead of merger and as merger is enacted (Gleibs *et al.*, 2013). Gleibs *et al.* (2013) posit that perceived (un)fairness and emotional reactions to the merger affect merger integration and hence the assumed outcome from merger. This finding is aligned with propositions from many researchers on the need for 'people matters' to be given due consideration as the plans to deliver the new structure were drawn up (Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001; Searle and Ball, 2004; Gomes *et al.*, 2017). For example a transparent and authentic rationale for the new structure together with a fair and open process for selection and appointment would have enabled trust to be built, (section 4.5.1) (Searle and Ball, 2004; Razi and Garrick, 2019).

for leaders to build trust has been identified numerous times, however, the

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researcher wishes to further posit that leaders need to occupy themselves with looking for

opportunities for building trust as trust is so critically important, through use of language, decision making, staff briefings and other such opportunities. Van Den Heuvel *et al.* (2016) postulate that building trust will yield more constructive responses to organisational change than focussing on managing an organisational change as an independent event. In this research there was evidence of low trust and focus on performativity and control, as was evident in section 5.2.

# Chapter 7 Conclusions and Recommendations

## 7.1 Introduction

Leaders need to have a highly tuned sense of emotional intelligence so as to be more aware and more able to build and maintain trust with their staff. Not to consider the importance of trust building as a key leadership challenge suggests an acute lack of skills and/or lack of insight. This study suggests that there is an acute and urgent need to review GFEC policy environment as it drives professional practice in every avenue of GFEC. Interestingly, an article published recently suggests that the UK Government is considering significant changes to the GFEC policy environment (Linford, 2020).

This study seeks to develop, in line with the literature, a tangible link between, leadership practice, communication and decision making with staff emotional wellbeing, trust and engagement (Buono and Bowditch, 2003; Seo and Hill, 2005; Sarala, Vaara and Junni, 2017). The notion of emotional wellbeing, not just for individuals but also organisationally has become apparent (Khan et al., 2017). Staff need to reflect together, it can seem to be synonymous to organisational empathy with the institution, not just as collection of individuals but also institutionally. The reality of merger is that the job is not done once the merger is enacted; indeed the change is still happening until staff within the institution start to see themselves as belonging to the new institution, the implication is that the merger timeline needs to be viewed as more than mono-dimensional. The need for well-considered and authentic communication cannot be over emphasised.

So, for example, the rationale for merger, how merger was being communicated including use of language and how the choice of words used, all affected staff at different stages of the merger process, or indeed any significant organisational change process. The success and smoothness of merger implementation was largely affected by staff emotional wellbeing much more than operational aspects such as organisational structures or changes to systems and process and this is evident in this case study (Cartwright and Cooper, 1993, 2014).

Resentment can and does impact staff engagement not only with their peers in a damaging way but also with students, employers and other stakeholders (Theron and Dodd, 2011). This, in turn, causes the organisation to become less effective and less successful, impacting on student success, student experience, student progression and potentially student recruitment. Managers need to drive positive change and strive for clarity of purpose of merger based on trust and a well-articulated case for merger, not simply 'it is better for the college', or 'the government wants us to merge', or 'the other college needs help'. Articulating the case for merger together with an open dialogue with staff will enable more staff to buy into the merger and hence be less resentful. It is evident that this manager was being truthful to his values and is clear about the purpose of his role, 'focussed on students and their experience', which one would expect to be fully aligned to the values and purpose of management, yet it seemed not to be the case in this example.

Page, (2017) argued, in defence of Principals that those we have are the Principals we want and deserve, in a throttling system of performativity and marketisation. Though I agree that neoliberal marketisation of GFEC has driven this change to the extent that we have a system that values and recognises principals who are, as Page puts it, 'foxes and lions' rather than 'lambs'. I believe this offers a shallow view of what is needed and what is happening to the sector. This shallow view is that what colleges need are principals who are highly empathetic and highly emotionally sensitive (Cartwright and Cooper, 2009; Harper, 2018). Highly emotionally intelligent, values drive, leaders are able to work beyond systems and process efficiencies to engage people and hence leverage more good will and more engagement from their staff. As a case in point, the way colleges have seamlessly and quickly transformed into remote learning hubs due to the Covid19 crisis in the UK demonstrated that staff were adaptable to help their learners and not because their leaders demanded this change.

The various aspects and drivers to emotional wellbeing were all at play impacting different staff at varying times in diverse ways, in varying levels of intensity as they (staff) went about their working days and when they were out of their working routine, as they sit to reflect with colleagues, friends, family or on their own. The key message to leaders, managers and governors is as follows: if you ignore the emotional wellbeing of your staff

things will never work and you will be consumed by chasing the mirage of compliance. That is to say, leaders and managers can expend a lot of time, thought and energy on getting staff to comply with management systems, processes and edicts, but it will not work. In fact, as management deploy yet more performativity and draconian measures, the worse things get in terms of compliance and productivity (Bogenschutz and Wright, 2000; Pieterse, Caniëls and Homan, 2012). Pieterse, Caniëls and Homan (2012) in their discussion of the 'inner side of organisational change' argue that the more managers try to manage change, the more it comes to a halt. That is to say, control is inversely proportional to compliance.

Trust and distrust can be built by shared goals, by dialogue, by looking for shared norms, monitoring and handling deviance (Van Den Heuvel et al., 2016; Donovan, 2019). Cultural change processes were found to be dependent on legitimisation of the changes, clarification of goals and changes in what is expected of organisational members, monitoring and guidance, conditions of psychological safety, and feedback on success and failure outcomes that is worked upon in a learning mode.

Change sometimes, whether it be perceived or real, feels like one's professional expertise is not being recognised, for example, when a member of staff is being told to change the way they do something only because it differs from the manager's expectations. Staff might not resent change if the reason for this change is explained to them and they are given the opportunity to discuss the change and potentially how their way might work better. Everyone values and is protective of their professional expertise, the GFEC work setting is no exception. To have one's professional expertise not recognised or dismissed, profoundly damages peoples' professional standing and impacts one's professional identity (Sachs, 2001). Wenger (1998) argues that teachers' professional identities are rich and complex because they are produced in a rich and complex set of relations of practice. This perspective is important as this richness and complexity is highly valued by teachers as part of their professional identities as it reflects their lived experiences and their value systems (Sachs, 2001).

## 7.2 Leadership Debate

Leaders in GFEC, just like any other sector, are a reflection of the experiences that might have shaped their careers and the policy framework that governs their sector (Barowsky, 2003). Participation in organisational life, from a cultural perspective, is a social construct, similar to participating in a theatrical play. A symbolic interpretive approach. It is difficult, destabilising and disorientating for new members, in a merger situation, to assume roles within the new organisation without a meaningful symbolic journey to move from their original organisational culture (that existed) to the new organisational culture.

What Mycroft and Weatherby, (2017: 188) posit, in a somewhat emotionally appealing argument, is that heroic leadership has had its day and that it is high time for 'social purpose leadership'. I would agree that heroic leadership has had its day, but not because it is no longer fashionable or it is not appealing, but because it simply doesn't work. Though it was appealing at the time for business gurus and business schools to promote, social purpose leadership can appeal because it is more likely to work in a GFEC setting (Mycroft and Weatherby, 2017). Contrary to what Harper (2018) posits, that management is management wherever it is and it is the implementation that differs, experience tells us that this is not the case and in fact, management thinking of this nature is rather dangerous, though accepted by neoliberal political ideologists. Management and leadership need to be closely aligned to the type of person and the values that motivate them in any particular sector (Elliott, 2015). A more diffused model of leadership can be more effective especially in an F/HE setting (Devecchi *et al.*, 2018). Devecchi *et al.* (2018) posit the view that diffused leadership is a model that can be more effective in leading organisations by offering more stability for staff, a position supported by this study. This study posits the view that the underlying proposition for diffused leadership effectiveness is threefold; diffused leadership is more able to build trust (Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001), it enables organisational actors to travel the symbolic journey of change in their own feelings and emotions so that they can build emotional bridges with existing prevailing culture players (López-Domínguez *et al.*, 2013) and it mitigates against institutional blunders by building organisational resilience through tapping into a wider pool of expertise and emotions (Knight, 2006; Scrivener, 2014).



It is difficult for me to dissociate myself and my own subjectivity as a practitioner from this debate as I find myself truly immersed in the intellectual debate as well as the emotional involvement as a college Principal who has experienced, first hand, over a considerable period of time, many of the challenges and the experiences that are being discussed and hypothesised upon in this chapter. As a pragmatist, I can see that diffused leadership is more likely to achieve organisational cohesion and a sharing of responsibility, however, it is more difficult to implement as it requires a different regulatory framework and a different type of leader.

### **7.2.1 Critical appraisal of leadership**

Part of the issue is that over the period since incorporation (HM-Government, 1992), the FE sector has gone through acute marketisation and a policy shift towards the learner becoming a consumer of education. Page (2019) argues that in HE, the shift in policy towards marketisation has had a considerable impact on academics which he terms as 'commodification of the DNA of the university'. He argues that it provides the context for the seduction of the modern academic within the consumer society, a movement from the gratification of needs to the perpetual frustration of desires through the 'Diderot Effect' of policy shifts. The shift in policy towards marketisation in FE has been more acute in policy; qualification, purpose, funding and regulation (Keep, 2007; Hodgson and Spours, 2015). That leads to a proposition that the impact on FE has been considerably more, to date, than HE for two reasons; it started earlier for FE, and because FE did not have a unified strong sense of mission and identity before incorporation to protect what FE's purpose was, it still doesn't have a voice. FE needed and still needs a clear mission that situates what it aims to accomplish within a coherent, stable and purposeful practice and policy framework (Foster, 2005; Keep, 2007, 2015; Hadawi and Crabbe, 2018; Hadawi, 2019; Hodgson and Spours, 2019). This change in the DNA has led to a more profound and more pronounced impact on practitioners in FE from what is being experienced by HE practitioners. The impact has affected all aspects of GFEC including leadership and management (Keep, 2007; Bush and Middlewood, 2013). The consequence is that we have principals who are products of this neoliberal thinking, shaped by it and arguably may only be able to function within it.

### **7.3 Implications for Policy**

Leadership in FE needs to have a dual role, a localised institutional leadership role as well as sector wide leadership role (Hadawi, 2019). This is not about one individual or a small group of leaders who feel the need for such discourse and indeed work to help make it a reality, it is more about the whole sector taking responsibility for the sector as an integral part of its leadership discourse. It seems that 'sector leadership' has largely been absent for as long as the sector has existed, silo thinking perhaps.

This vacuum in leadership can trace its origins back to the time of college incorporation. The neoliberal policy discourse, which suggested that market forces and competition would help create a skills ecosystem that would meet the needs of the economy and society, did not deliver on its promise. Colleges were incentivised to put themselves before the needs of the sector as a whole and, as a result of incorporation, a collegiate and cohesive sector was never formed. Though I see this as a leadership failure, I do not see it as the sole failure of sector leaders because leaders in the sector are a product, as mentioned earlier, of a sector policy environment which encourages competition performativity and control (Goddard-Patel and Whitehead, 2000; Keep, 2007; Orr, 2009).

This position responds to Page's (2017: 36) contention that principals are keeping young people in education and 'keeping the neoliberal wolf from the door'. Indeed they are, however, individual Principals cannot achieve policy change on their own but all Principals, aided by research evidence, can enable a sector voice to challenge and be the 'go-to' authority on aspects relating to skills, economy, productivity, community cohesion, citizenship, social mobility, social justice and other matters relating to the broader mission of FE.

It is astonishing that fourteen years after a Government's own review into FE, Foster's, (2005) central recommendation, which was accepted by the Government at the time, for a sector mission to be agreed has not been implemented. The more recent review in post 18 funding and reform (the Augar Review) is likely to have the same fate (Hubble and Bolton, 2019). This seemingly pessimistic view emanates from the recognition that policy will not

change unless leaders in GFEC recognise the need for sector-wide leadership and take steps to make it a new sector norm (Hadawi, 2019). That leads to the proposition that what Mycroft and Weatherby (2017) term 'social purpose leadership' has a decisive, hard-nosed potential success to the work of leadership teams. This proposition is further supported by O'Leary *et al.* (2019) where their study asserts that a structured autonomy, non-controlling approach to professional practice helps to improve the quality of teaching and learning, sustains the improvements and consequently improves outcomes for learners.

It follows that the current neoliberal ideology policy of performativity and mistrust for Further Education is counterproductive and hence cannot achieve what it is set out to do. It could be argued that it is these management schools and management theories that might have driven the creation of the neoliberal policy environment which FE is experiencing. There is evidence in this case study which supports Elliott's (2015) central proposition, that leadership in FE can be more effective if it were to tap into and be part of the post compulsory research evidence informed practice. This engagement with research would provide FE practice in leadership and other aspects such as teaching and learning with the tools and evidence to shape and challenge policy.

### **7.3.1 Policy & Guidance Recommendations discussion points**

In Further Education, policy, much of the time, drives practice. For example, in college mergers, there is a policy directive which stipulates that legal, financial and asset due diligence should be conducted by independent recognised professional companies and that there is government funding, if need be, to fund these activities. For this reason, all mergers in FE need to demonstrate that the due diligence has been conducted as directed by the guidance (AoC, 2017). However, guidance is largely silent on what to do about culture but acknowledges its importance. I argue, in agreement with Steen (2015), that leaders don't have the skills nor the insight into what to do about people matters. I posit that this is caused, in part, by the fact that policy never drove them to learn and explore more about culture and integration. Therefore, it is imperative for policy to stipulate the need for culture due diligence ahead of merger and for funds to be allocated to such endeavors. Cartwright

and Cooper (2014) and Steen (2015) argue that as culture is the predominant cause for merger failure, it is critical that culture due diligence and people matters are afforded key focus so as to raise the possibility of merger success and reduce staff anxiety and disengagement. Indeed Steen, (2015) goes further by arguing that there is no need for financial and legal due diligence in college merger as they are normally tightly regulated and their accounts annually externally audited. He proposes that the expense would be better spent on educational and cultural due diligence; this study agrees with his findings.

Policy guidance and merger guidance to college corporations needs to be much richer and much more detailed with respect to people matters (Steen, 2015). Policy and consequently allowable funding from Government grants for mergers need to be proportional such that an appropriate amount of the funding is dedicated to people matters. This will enable the involvement of HRM professionals in leading the process of merger with regard to people matters.

Mergers are incredibly complex and complicated processes. Therefore, it is inappropriate to assume that all leadership teams are equipped to manage such a process, especially if they have never had experience of such events previously. It might be appropriate that central support systems are provided to help manage this transition. Support systems that are underpinned by collective collaboration that eschews the 'heroic leadership'.

#### **7.4 Implications for professional practice**

The intention was not to disturb the way College A had operated previously; there was a 'business as usual' mentality, where systems, processes, values and culture remain unchanged. It follows that, for college B, culture, systems, processes and values would have to fall in line and change to conform to the new reality of the new college, 'the College A way'. This approach is problematic, in accordance with the literature, as mergers fail at times, due to the expectation that one organisation's culture, could be subsumed into that of the prevailing organisation (Sales and Mirvis, 1984). The contention is that the Principal's

intention indicates either a simplistic view of culture acculturation or a blatant disregard to organisational culture (Seo and Hill, 2005).

There is another point to note which was that staff engaged in introspection and reflection. Staff utilised their discussions and the topics/themes they identified as representative of the synergies of their own silent brain-storm to engage in reflective practice (Schön, 1983; Boddy, 2012). In line with the findings from this study, Donovan (2019) posits the need for the creation of safe spaces for staff to reflect as a means of building trust and dealing with the fragility and emotional wellbeing of staff. Welsh and Dehler (2004) emphasise the need for organised critical reflection to be part of ongoing organised social interaction through institutionalised processes. With reference to this study, it is argued that the need for staff to be able to reflect in a methodical and deliberate manner for their voice needs to be heard and listened to so as to enhance the merger journey and to reduce the negative impact of merger on the wellbeing of staff.

The researcher would argue for a third way in which staff voice is enabled to form and encouraged to help influence policy and practice as this need emanates from a prudent performativity culture located in the recognition that merged colleges need to succeed and thrive. The argument that staff voice needs to be reclaimed can be situated in an anti-managerialism, anti-power democratic discourse (Gleeson *et al.*, 2015). However, it might be more powerful and would certainly attract a lot less resistance from policy makers and leaders if it were situated in straight-forward effective professional practice of leadership and management.

Resistance to reclamation would not only be from policy makers and leadership practitioners as it might appear to be anti-change agenda by demonstrating an anti-power stance (Giroux, 1983). Resistance from staff themselves to this stance as it might invoke, even if unintentionally, political allegiances and hence going down a discourse which it was never intended to do. Leaders in any sector, just as is the case in FE, need to develop a deep understanding of the people who work in their sector (Vugt, Hogan and Kaiser, 2008; Devecchi *et al.*, 2018). This deep sense of people requires leaders to be confident and able to share their own vulnerability and uncertainty at times with their staff (Wahlstrom and

Louis, 2008; Donovan, 2019). These are normal human traits, yet seem unnatural when senior leaders assume such high positions. It is suggested, in this study, that building trust by displaying vulnerability and creating safe space for reflection could have helped this merger progress more favourably for staff and learners and consequently leaders and policy makers.

It is further suggested that managers and teachers can utilise the same space for reflective practice to enable shared learning and shared experiences that will contribute to trust building. This sharing of reflections and experiences can contribute to improvements in professional practice for both managers and teachers. Gray (2007) argues that reflective learning can help improve management professional practice. It is further argued that as teaching is a naturally reflective profession, sharing the reflective practice with managers can aid understanding and trust which in turn can help the issues identified by Mansour, Heath and Brannan (2015).

Fundamentally this study enabled participants to make explicit feelings and thinking that they had internalised and had no opportunity to say out loud and reflect on. This can be seen as one of the many ways in which doing research can impact on stakeholders in agreement with literature (Husband, 2017).

#### **7.4.1 Professional Practice discussion points**

Mergers need to be viewed along multiple time lines and not as a linear process that has one defined start and one defined conclusion. Leaders and managers need to acknowledge and communicate different timelines for various strands of one merger. So for example, the legal merger might be enacted by a set date but all staff need to understand that a merger is a phenomenally complex experience for staff and hence it needs an appropriately complex narrative in communicating the different strands of the merger. So whereby the legal merger might be enacted by a certain date, it is entirely possible to have an alternative date, potentially 36 months from the date of enacting the merger where staff structures, rebuilding community relationships, systems alignment, process alignment are conducted

over a different continuum. This way, there is time and an expectation for all to work together to align culture and deal with staff emotional wellbeing, resilience and trust with key milestones and indicators to be met at different points.

The involvement of human resource management (HRM) professionals in leading the process of change with regard to people matters seems alien in professional circles and might give an impression that the Principal and senior leaders are not in control of their brief and not in control of their organisation and hence relying on internal/external HRM professionals. Ironically however, it is perfectly acceptable, indeed expected, to recruit a firm of accountants and lawyers to conduct the legal and financial due diligence and to enact the merger. Yet almost everybody acknowledges that people matters are the most complex to deal with and to get right and everybody acknowledges that in education, in this case GFEC, the most critical aspect for business success and continuity are the people. It follows to have people as the highest priority in a merger situation and hence for HRM professionals to lead the change process.

The need for culture due diligence is acutely more critical for the future success of merger than legal, financial and asset due diligence (Steen, 2015). It is important to note that legal, financial and asset due diligence are important to conduct but only to uncover key matters that might affect the future merged institution rather than window dressing to demonstrate similarity and robustness in comparison to private sector mergers and acquisitions (Steen, 2015). Steen (2015) argues that leaders need to lead the people matters in merger situations and demonstrate role modelling to help enable staff to experience alignment between their values and the values of their leaders, otherwise failure to do so will lead to irrecoverable loss of staff trust in leaders.

The pace of change needs to be considerate of peoples' emotions and perceptions so as to build trust and not to cause staff to be anxious and fragile (Williams, Roberts and Shires, 2019). Just like there is Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to ensure that there is a professional route for workforce entering Further Education, there need to be professional training routes for managers and leaders. Leaders and managers need to be trained in people matters and how people's emotional wellbeing may be impacted by profound change such as merger and

in turn, how people's emotional wellbeing and resilience might impact the whole organisation in ways that are much more profound than anticipated. Merger training for leaders needs to include merger complexity, the experience for staff, emotional wellbeing, staff fragility and communication. Detailed merger planning, on how and who to engage to support the people change journey as part of a merger situation, as well as financial, assets and legal aspects of merger, are essential.

The recommendations for the way GFEC mergers should be managed and led were presented to the AoC National Conference in November 2019, see Appendix

## **7.5 Limitations of this study**

The snapshot approach to data collection may have resulted in conclusions being drawn from a relatively shallow view of staff feelings and experiences. The inclusion of a small number of participants may have resulted in the findings being located in the lived experiences of this small number of staff and hence cannot be seen as representative of the population of the College. The non-inclusion of learners has removed the possibility of offering potentially different and more comprehensive insights in the lived experiences of learners and hence potentially impacting policy and leadership practice differently. The non-inclusion of professional services staff might have removed valuable insights into how merger affects the whole college positively or negatively.

## **7.6 Agenda for further research**

- A more detailed longitudinal study along the timeline of FE merger, starting at the point of proposition to merge and mapping the timeline well into the merger and continuing into the newly formed college, for example, for three years from the date of enactment of merger can shed some useful light for academic research, policy-making and professional practice.



- A more longitudinal study of merger in FE to consider staff emotional wellbeing, trust and fragility has the possibility of contributing new learning to FE mergers.
- A study to identify the criteria for the various merger timelines; enactment, merger of organisational structures, systems and process and merger cultural integration.
- Involving learners into a study similar to this study has the possibility of offering new learning that has been missing from this study.
- Future research into the impact of FE policy on leadership practice – what are the ways in which GFEC neoliberal policy-making impacts/affects leadership professional practice?

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1

Examples of communication with participants including initial approach to the Principal.

One of the key steps was to conduct an extended telephone meeting with the Principal ahead of the Principal agreeing to take part to explain, in detail, the wider benefits of the research. The telephone meeting included an explanation of the purpose of the research, the scarcity of research evidence to enhance merger leadership professional practice and an outline of how this work would enhance future college mergers. The Principal was also appraised of the useful in-depth analysis of his organisation which could help inform future management activity and staff engagement (Buono and Bowditch, 2003). The confidentiality and anonymity arrangements were also discussed and agreed. Email 1 below, together with the attached document were sent after this telephone meeting.

### Email 1 to Principal and Document

Hi ()

I hope all is well.

As promised, but a lot later than I had hope, this is a brief note regarding the research. In this note you will see, very briefly, what the research aims to do and what requirements I have. I had initially drafted more than 12 pages, hence the delay, and then thought you naturally do not have time for all that so I cut it back. I have a lot more info which I can send if you wish me to.

I have also drafted info sheets for participants which I will forward to you once you have had the chance to see the attached.

Have a great day.

Ali

Attached Document – Briefing about the study

**Researcher:            Ali Hadawi**

### **Managing organisational culture in a merged General Further Education College in England: A Case Study**

Research into organisational culture within FE is of critical importance to leaders and managers, as it gives an insight into the ability of managers and leaders to manage and lead

beyond systems, processes and compliance. Part of this importance emanates from the need to be able to reconfigure and realign a college’s culture following merger to create institutions that are unified in their values, norms and goals.

The Research Aims to answer the following two questions:

1. What are the perspectives of internal stakeholders, namely teachers, curriculum managers and leaders, on the impact of mergers in general further education colleges (GFEC)?
2. What underpins college leadership professional practice in mergers?

The study was designed to achieve the following aims:

- **Aim 1:** To develop a deep understanding of the lived experiences of internal stakeholders, namely teachers, managers and leaders, by examining how merger impacts them, to inform the academic literature and professional practice.
- **Aim 2:** To explore and examine what underpins college’s leadership professional practice during merger.

As to accomplish the above, the following objectives were set:

- **Objective 1:** Explore the ways in which teachers, managers and leaders are affected by college merger
- **Objective 2:** Explore the main drivers (what) and (how) to affect Organisational Culture alignment in a GFEC merger
- **Objective 3:** To critically examine the drivers for professional practice in a GFEC merger and to provide recommendations for decision makers.

Research Methodology and Method:

Interview: As part of this study, the principal and the chair of the College will be interviewed individually (see table 1 below). This will enable a better insight into what the principal and chair perceive as the most important, if any, actions to enable organisational cultural alignment.

Table 1: Interview Arrangements

Interview	Interviewee	Approx. Length (min)
1	Principal	60 (1hr)
2	Chair of Corporation	60 (1hr)

Focus Group:

Focus group meetings with teachers and curriculum managers will be held. Teacher focus groups will aim to have between 6 and 8 participants from each of the former colleges which formed the new merged college separately. Curriculum managers’ focus groups will have 4 to 6 participants from each of the former colleges which formed the new merged college separately (see table 2 below). The focus groups will be semi-structured in that it will follow the same line of questioning but will allow enough freedom for participants to

explore areas further. This will enable a better insight into what staff think as most important to enable them to work effectively.

Table 2: Focus Group Arrangements

Focus Group	Focus	Number of participants	Approx. Length of time (min)	Former College
1	Curriculum managers	4-6	45 - 60	A
2	Curriculum managers	4-6	45 - 60	B
3	Teachers	6-8	45 - 60	A
4	Teachers	6-8	45 - 60	B

**Timing:**

The aim is to start the data collection in Autumn 2017. Ideally the timing would be as follows:

1. Meet with the Principal and Chair in October 2017
2. Teacher and manager focus groups in late October 2017 (depending on their availability, perhaps review week).

End.

Following the agreement of the Principal to take part, email 2, below, was sent.

Email 2 to Principal

**From:** Ali Hadawi  
**Sent:** 07 February 2018 14:56  
**To:**  
**Subject:** Research  
**Importance:** High

Dear ()

Thank you for agreeing to the () Colleges Group to be the field of research for my Prof Doctorate which I discussed with you recently.

I am attaching the following for your feedback and approval ahead of organising our meeting.

1. Questions for my interview with you
2. Questions for my interview with the Chair of Governors
3. A question to centre the discussion around for teachers and managers in the focus groups.

Please let me know if you wish for any of the questions to be changed. As discussed the name of the college and all participants' details will be anonymised for the purposes of this research. I will contact you in a week to 10 days to discuss the logistics of our meeting.

All best wishes

Ali

Ali Hadawi CBE  
Principal & Chief executive  
Central Bedfordshire College

Attached Documents from email 2 above are in Appendix 2

Email 3 to Principal and Staff to initiate data collection

Dear ()

I am keen, if at all possible for me to have the focus group meetings with teachers and managers before Easter, do you think that might be possible.

To aid organising the meetings, I list them below.

Focus Group	Focus	Number of participants	Approx. Length of time (min)	Former College
1	Curriculum managers	4-8	60	College A
2	Curriculum managers	4-8	60	College B (any campus)
3	Teachers	6-8	60	College A
4	Teachers	6-8	60	College B (any campus)

I am happy to take on any element or the whole of the organising if you wish me to.

Thanks

Ali

## **Appendix 2**

### **Interview Questions, NTG seed question and Focus Group instructions Participants**

#### **Interview and Focus Group Details:**

##### **Data Collection Arrangements**

The Researcher arranged to have two audio recording devices and one video recording device to ensure that the data was recorded and saved on more than one system and in more than one format, as a fail-safe mechanism. This was because there would not be an opportunity to repeat the data collection exercise if the recording fails. This level of prior planning enhanced my confidence in managing the data collection stage and also gave participants a higher level of engagement in the project (Yin, 2013).

##### **Questions for Principal's interview (emailed beforehand)**

In the context of aligning the organisational culture of the two colleges following the merger of the two college's, I am interested in exploring with you the work that is being done, has been done, to align the two college's cultures into one.

As the Principal and CEO of the new merged College:

1. As the Principal and CEO, what has been your role in making the merger happen? What were the highlights? What were the key challenges?
2. What do you think (How would you describe) the organisational culture of your College? Do you have a view on the culture of the other college?
3. I am looking into aligning or misalignment of organisational culture of the two colleges, so in this context, how much importance do you attach to the alignment of Org Culture?
4. How do you see the strategic approach to the merger impacting the organisational culture?
5. What action, if any, have you been able to implement in this regard? How did you go about this implementation?
6. How well is it working? How do you know that? /What makes you think so?
7. In what ways do you plan to monitor the impact of this work? Is this currently in place?

8. What barriers have you experienced in affecting organisational culture alignment during this merger?
9. How is the merger going?

Are you able to share any examples, events, documents, reports that might shed some light on the alignment process?

### **Questions for Chair's interview (emailed beforehand)**

In the context of aligning the organisational culture of the two colleges following the merger of the two college's, I am interested in exploring with you the work that is being done, has been done, to align the two college's cultures into one.

As the Chair of Governors of the new merged College:

1. What has been your role in the merger? What were the highlights? What were the key challenges?
2. What do you think the organisational culture of your College? Do you have a view on the organisational culture of the other college?
3. How important, in your view, is the alignment of organisational culture to the success of the new college?
4. How do you see your role and that of your fellow governors in aligning the organisational culture of the two college?
5. What, in your view, is the role of the principal in aligning the organisational culture of the two college? How do you see him/her conducting this?
6. What do you see as the hallmarks of a well aligned college?
7. Do you think it is working? What makes you think so?
8. How do you know whether the plan is working or not?
9. How is the merger going?

Are you able to share any examples, events, documents, reports that might shed some light on the alignment process?

## **Data Collection Arrangements (at each event)**

At the start, the researcher starts by explaining the purpose of the research and the methodology. That was followed by what the NGT process is and how it works. The key to NGT is a silent brainstorm to answer the seed question, see below. Normally, on self-adhesive notes with one response per note. Participants were given as long as they needed until they stopped writing, each group took between 13-15 minute, as is normally the case for such activities (Denny-Adviser 2005). The participants were instructed to share their thoughts in a structured and methodical way. Once all the ideas were shared, participants realised that there was much synergy in their thoughts and they were asked to theme their thoughts. The session then followed with a discussion about the themes, which were identified by the participants, and how these ideas might be developed, taking approximately 60 minutes.

NGT, in the context of this research, was used to gather information by asking participants to respond to the seed question, see below. Participants were then asked to share their ideas by externalising them one at a time. It was followed by theming the ideas as a whole group activity.

Focus group meetings with teachers and curriculum managers were held (Morgan 1996, Morgan, Krueger 1998). Teacher focus groups had between 6 and 10 participants from each of the former Colleges (A and B) which formed the new merged college separately and Curriculum managers' focus groups had 4 to 5 participants from each of the former colleges, see **Error! Reference source not found.** The focus groups ran as semi-structured in that they followed the same line of questioning but allowed enough freedom for participants to explore areas further (King, Horrocks 2010, Chambliss, Schutt 2015). That way, the focus groups enabled better insight into what staff thought was most important to enable them to work effectively (Forrester 2010, King, Horrocks 2010, Chambliss, Schutt 2015).



## **Focus Groups**

The NGT provided an ideal opportunity for participants to engage in a reflective exercise which served as an ice-breaker. The externalisation of their thoughts helped them feel as though they were in a discussion circle which is a natural phenomenon in an education institution. The NGT enabled participants to enter into a dialogue amongst themselves and to forget, as much as possible, about the researcher. The researcher needed to take a low-profile role during the session as the participants were having their discussion. The low prominence of the researcher ensured that the participants felt at ease with him and not too conscious that he was not part of their institution.

### **Focus Group meeting:**

There were four focus group meetings aiming to answer the seed question

### **The Seed Question**

*'In what ways and how might you describe the way leaders have worked/sought to align the organisation culture of the two colleges to enable a unified college to emerge?'*

### **Teacher Focus Groups:**

1. Teachers' focus group meetings will have 6- 8 participants.
2. There will be two focus group meetings, one for teachers from college A and one for teachers from college B
3. The focus groups will begin with a silent brainstorm, for 12-15 minutes
4. See instructions on how to operate the process which will be shared with participants prior to the event and will be clarified on the day
5. The participants will then theme their thoughts
6. Following the theming exercise, the participants will discuss the themes they had created.
7. The discussion will be facilitated by the researcher

### **Manager Focus Groups:**

1. Managers' focus group meetings will have 4-6 participants.
2. There will be two focus group meetings, one for teachers from college A and one for teachers from college B

3. The focus groups will begin with a silent brainstorm, for 12-15 minutes
4. See instructions on how to operate the process which will be shared with participants prior to the event and will be clarified on the day
5. The participants will then theme their thoughts
6. Following the theming exercise, the participants will discuss the themes they had created.
7. The discussion will be facilitated by the researcher

### **Silent Brainstorm (NGT)**

#### **Instructions to participants:**

1. Write down your thoughts to the question clearly and concisely.
2. You need to write full points *not* single words as others will need to understand your point without the need for you to explain it
3. You will be given 'post it' pads to put your thoughts on
4. You need to work in complete silence even once you have finished, so 'No talking during this stage'
5. Write as many thoughts as you can within the time you will be given by the researcher
6. Every response needs to be on a separate 'post it'
7. Use as many 'post it' notes as you wish
8. No idea is off bounds • even ideas that may seem implausible at first glance may be extremely useful for sparking off further conversation and idea generation later on
9. No idea should/will be criticised • constructive discussions will follow this exercise
10. Feel free to come up with many different ideas, without fear of judgement or criticism
11. Once you have finished, remain in complete silence and await further instructions from the researcher

## Appendix 3

### Data Collection Arrangements

**Table d Interview Arrangements**

Interview	Interviewee	Length (min)
1	Principal	75
2	Chair of Governors	75

**Table e Nominal Group Technique (NTG) Arrangements**

NTG	Participants	Number of participants	Length of time (min)	Former College	Purposive Sampling Criteria
1	Curriculum managers	5	25-35	A	In this role, in College A prior to the merger
2	Curriculum managers	3	25-35	B	In this role, in College B prior to the merger
3	Teachers	3	25-35	A	In this role, in College A prior to the merger
4	Teachers	8	25-35	B	In this role, in College B prior to the merger

**Table f Focus Group Arrangements (discussion part)**

Focus Group	Participants	Number of participants	Length of time (min)	Former College
1	Curriculum managers	5	45	A
2	Curriculum managers	3	45	B
3	Teachers	3	55	A
4	Teachers	8	60	B

## **Appendix 4**

Ethical Considerations including participant communication and participant consent.

Information sent to all participants:

This research will be conducted in full adherence to the code of ethics for the University of Northampton (UoN) and the code of ethics for Further Education Colleges in England.

The researcher has completed the online training on ethics at the UoN and has successfully passed the online assessment (mandatory level 1 and optional level 2).

The researcher has already got an enhanced CRB (Criminal Record Bureau) check which will help in obtaining access GFE colleges to conduct the research.

Due to the potential sensitivity of this research, the researcher will be seeking the approval of the board of governors of the college (the field of study). Once the board has approved the participation, a participant consent form will be issued to all participants.

The ethical considerations will be reviewed alongside the research due to the sensitivity and centrality of these considerations to the research and to the potential outcome.

Code of Conduct for this research:

- a. Participation is on a voluntary basis.
- b. Information pack provided to participants prior to their involvement.
- c. Board of Governors approved consent is given & signed prior to engagement
- d. Participant approved consent is given & signed prior to engagement
- e. Participants are able to withdraw at any time.
- f. Individual and organisational anonymity is maintained.
- g. Data is held secure in line with the Data Protection Act.

## **Participant Information Sheet**

### **Title: Managing organisational culture in merged General Further Education Colleges in England: A Case Study**

Intended recipients:

- Chair of Corporation
- Principal
- Curriculum Managers
- Teachers

#### **Purpose of this research:**

The General Further Education Colleges (GFEC) sector in England is going through unprecedented levels of change in context and in pace.

In September 2015, the British government introduced a series of Area Based Reviews (ABR) over five-waves to review the structure of further education colleges sector in England. The intent is to reduce the number of colleges in England, through mergers and produce, what they term 'larger, better and more resilient' colleges. This is the most significant structural change to the Sector since the 1992 incorporation act.

The focus of the government is on reducing costs in line with the austerity agenda through the public sector.

There is a lot of evidence from past mergers supported by a significant body of academic research that for mergers to work, specific focus needs to be directed at aligning the organisational cultures of the merging institutions. This is to create one new entity with all staff having one goal to work towards achieving.

Research into organisational culture within GFE is of critical importance to governors, leaders and managers, as it gives an insight into the ability of managers and leaders to manage and lead beyond systems, processes and compliance. Part of this importance emanates from the need to be able to reconfigure and realign a college's culture following merger.

The research in further education organisational culture is very limited. The area of college mergers is not well researched either.

The guidance which has been produced by the Government, through its agencies, on mergers is mostly concerned with financial arrangements, legal matters and transfer of

assets. There is no guidance on organisational cultural matters. When mergers fail, as was the case in the K College example, it is mostly due to culture clash.

### **This Research will be focussed on:**

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

3. What are the perspectives of internal stakeholders, namely teachers, curriculum managers and leaders, on the impact of mergers in general further education colleges (GFEC)?
4. What underpins college leadership professional practice in mergers?

The study was designed to achieve the following aims:

- **Aim 1:** To develop a deep understanding of the lived experiences of internal stakeholders, namely teachers, managers and leaders, by examining how merger impacts them, to inform the academic literature and professional practice.
- **Aim 2:** To explore and examine what underpins college's leadership professional practice during merger.

As to accomplish the above, the following objectives were set:

- **Objective 1:** Explore the ways in which teachers, managers and leaders are affected by college merger
- **Objective 2:** Explore the main drivers (what) and (how) to affect Organisational Culture alignment in a GFEC merger
- **Objective 3:** To critically examine the drivers for professional practice in a GFEC merger and to provide recommendations for decision makers

### **How the research will be conducted:**

There will be three data collection methods as part of this research. These are:

- Interviews with the principal and the chair of the corporation (separately)
- Focus groups with teachers and managers
- Participant Observations

**Interview:** As part of this study, the principal and the chair will be interviewed individually (see table 1 below). This will enable a better insight into what the principal and chair perceive as the most important, if any, actions to enable organisational cultural alignment.

**Table 1: Interview Arrangements**

Interview	Interviewee	Approx. Length (min)
1	Principal	60 (1hr)
2	Chair of Corporation	60 (1hr)

**Focus Group:** As part of this research, focus group meetings with teachers and curriculum managers will be held. Teacher focus groups will aim to separately have 6 and 10 participants from each of the former colleges which formed the newly merged college.

Curriculum managers' focus groups will meet separately with 4 to 8 participants from each of the former colleges which formed the newly merged college (see table 2 below).

The focus groups will be semi-structured in that they will follow the same line of questioning but will allow enough freedom for participants to explore areas further. This will enable a better insight into what staff think as most important to enable them to work effectively. Focus groups will continue until information saturation is reached, that is to say, no further information can be gained.

No participant will participate in more than one focus group for a duration of between 45min to 1 hour.

**Table 2: Focus Group Arrangements**

Focus Group	Focus	Number of participants	Approx. Length of time (min)	Former College
1	Curriculum managers	4-8	45 - 60	A
2	Curriculum managers	4-8	45 - 60	B
3	Teachers	6-8	45 - 60	A
4	Teachers	6-8	45 - 60	B

### **Participant Observation**

Participant Observation (PO) is the intended technique to observe participant (teachers and managers) in their normal setting at the college. I will be observing participant interactions and will be making records of these observations by making notes. These notes will enable me to develop a richer and a more in-depth view of the culture of the college. This will be useful in understanding not just what people say but also how they act and behave in normal circumstances.

### **Who is the Researcher?**

My name is Ali Hadawi, I am principal at Central Bedfordshire College. My college have gone through ABR wave 5. I am conducting this research as part of a Professional Doctorate, a DBA (Doctorate in Business Administration), at the Northampton Business School which is part of the University of Northampton. I have an Enhanced CRB disclosure.

Board Approval Form

Dear Chair of Board of Governors (insert name)

I am writing to introduce myself and seek the Board's approval to use the (insert college name) in this research project.

I have attached an information sheet which gives details of the project and my role. I will be in touch shortly to discuss the project and the possibility for the College to be involved.

Yours sincerely

Ali Hadawi



## **Participant FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions)**

### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

The intent is that this is a relaxed and pleasurable experience that should take no more than an hour. You will have the opportunity to share your views about the culture of the college and how things get done.

You will be asked to provide written consent to ensure that you are happy to participate with the study.

You will have a relaxed discussion with the researcher. The discussion will be taped and then transcribed.

All your responses will be anonymised and kept completely confidential. The final report will not even be attributed to your college.

You will be invited to see the final findings of the study and how your contribution has been utilised within the study.

### **What are the risks?**

There are no risks in you taking part in the study. The Governing Body and management are supporting this study. You will need to provide your consent before the interview. If at a later stage you wish to retract this consent or withdraw at any time, simply inform the researcher.

### **Have the Board of Governors agreed to this?**

Board of Governor's approval will be sought prior to seeking the agreement to participation of the staff. Copies of written support are held by the researcher and will be provided upon request.

### **What will happen to the information?**

Information given will be stored securely on private servers and locked drives; the only person who will have access to this information is the researcher. He will use to information to support the development of the final research in answering the problems outlined above. Your personal details will be anonymised throughout the process to protect all those involved. Once the research is complete all your information will be destroyed. No information will be given to any third party.

Your contribution will not be disclosable under a freedom of information request.

**Not sure about participating? Or Do I have to take part?**

You do not have to take part, and can withdraw at any time. Just let the researcher know if you want him to stop.

**What happens if I'm not happy during the discussion, can I complain?**

Yes, if you feel that the researcher has not followed this brief or acted inappropriately please contact Northampton Business School on 01604 735500 and make a formal complaint. This will be taken very seriously.

**What do I do next?**

If you wish to participate in the research then please contact Ali Hadawi on the email address above. He will send you a consent form and make arrangements to meet you. Remember you can withdraw at any time.

Thank you for your interest and support.

## Appendix 5

Data from the different phases tables below and appendices 6 and 7 provide a comprehensive view of the outcomes at this stage of the analysis Phase 1 was followed by synthesis analysis phases 2, 3 (Tables 3 and 4 respectively)

shows the synthesised themes that produced 6 broad themes.

Phase 3, (table 4, appendix 3), of the synthesis was to attach a label to each of the 'broad themes', which reflects the broader meaning, that were identified during phase 2 (Flick, 2014; Clarke and Braun, 2017). The broad synthesised themes, in order of prevalence, were emotional wellbeing, power & control, functional & operational matters and finally communication including language.

### Appendix 5 Table Phase 1 Analysis Data showing percentage of occurrences

Name	Sources	References	Percentage
Reflection	6	54	8%
Discourse	12	47	7%
Resentment	5	44	7%
Lack of recognition of professional expertise	6	43	7%
Internal Communication	7	42	6%
Them and Us Culture	4	38	6%
Transparency	7	37	6%
Approach & Process	7	33	5%
Structure	3	31	5%
Timing and Pace	4	29	4%
Ways of working	4	28	4%
Systems and Processes	3	19	3%
Being Valued	3	19	3%
Difference	2	15	2%
Interpretation of actions (mistrust)	4	14	2%
Training	2	14	2%
Branding	2	12	2%
Recognition of professional expertise	2	12	2%
Language	3	11	2%
Willingness to change	4	10	2%
Benefit of the doubt	2	10	2%
Pre-merger	4	8	1%

## Appendix 6 Table Phase 2 Analysis Data

	% frequency of combined themes	Phase 1 Theme	combined with	combined with	combined with	combined with	combined with	combined with
90%	14%	Reflection	Them and Us Culture					
	23%	Leadership Discourse*	Transparency	Approach & Process	leadership	Timing and Pace		
	19%	Resentment	Lack of recognition of professional expertise	Difference	Interpretation of actions (mistrust)	Emotional wellbeing		
	12%	Internal Communication	Language	Communication	Lack of Clarity	Branding		
	17%	Management Structure	Ways of working	Systems and Processes	Training	Planning	Pre merger	Lack of clarity of new systems
	5%	Being Valued	Recognition of professional expertise	Being duped				

\* During the analysis phase, the term leadership discourse was used to mean the way the leadership team conducted themselves. Leadership discourse have a different meaning in the literature.

## Appendix 7 Table Phase 3 Analysis Data

Combined	% frequency	Broad Synthesised Theme	Theme	combined with	combined with	combined with	combined with	combined with	combined with
90%	14	Emotional wellbeing	Reflection	Them and Us Culture					
	23	Power	Leadership Discourse*	Transparency	Approach & Process	Leadership	Timing and Pace		
	19	Emotional wellbeing	Resentment	Lack of recognition of professional expertise	Difference	Interpretation of actions (mistrust)	Emotional wellbeing		
	12	Communication	Communication	Language	Internal communication	Lack of Clarity	Branding		
	17	Functional or operational	Structure	Ways of working	Systems and Processes	Training	Planning	Pre merger	Lack of clarity of new systems
	5	Emotional wellbeing	Being Valued	Recognition of professional expertise	Being duped				

\* During the analysis phase, the term leadership discourse was used to mean the way the leadership team conducted themselves. Leadership discourse have a different meaning in the literature.

## Appendix 8 Table Phase 4 Final Four Broad Themes

Broad Theme	Label
1	Emotional Wellbeing
2	Power and Control
3	Functional and Operational Matters
4	Communication and Use of Language

## Appendix 9

Presentation to the national conference of the Association of Colleges (AoC), November 2019.

AoC Presentation Nov 2019

Institution Specific

Don't ignore culture, embrace it, it will make your life and those of your staff considerably easier.

Focus on what is central to cultural alignment are:

1. **Culture Due Diligence:** Conduct culture due diligence at the same time as the legal and financial due diligence. Needless to say all due diligence needs to be conducted by expert professionals. Use the outcome to inform your planning.
2. **Timeline:** There needs to be three individual yet interlinked merger timelines:
  - a. Legal, asset and financial merger
  - b. Systems, structures and processes merger
  - c. Unifying the culture and creating a single purposeful cohesive college
3. **Merger Plan:** Create a merger plan that distinguishes and aims to manage the three strands in 2a-c above
4. **Trust:** Building trust with your staff (newly merged and existing) will enable you to implement your plans with ease and good will. If you feel that you can only trust your own staff initially (assuming you are the incumbent principal for one of the merger partners), then don't expect staff from the other college to trust you either. Trust is reciprocal.
5. **Vulnerability:**
  - a. Leaders and managers don't have to have all the answers and own all the ideas. It is normal to get things wrong sometimes; be open about mistakes and areas that you might not have answers for, showing humility and vulnerability is positive. It shows that you are human, it will win you a lot of allies who will wish to give you the benefit of the doubt. If you hadn't thought of something, say so; being vulnerable at times is a normal human behaviour and leaders aren't immune from vulnerability.
  - b. Your vulnerability and that of your staff are on a continuum. Do not purposely make your staff feel vulnerable at times, as that will give them a sense of helplessness and can lead to disengagement.
6. **Motivation for merger:** this is critically important.
  - a. It needs to be *specific* and articulated in a way that aligns to organisational *mission and values*.
  - b. The benefits of merger need to be meaningful and tangible to staff.
  - c. It must not be too general such as 'it is good for the local area' or 'it is good for FE'.
  - d. Make sure it is clear for you and others.
  - e. It needs to be shared consistently across all stakeholders internally and externally.
7. **Communication:** Communication and use of language are critical for merger success. It needs to focus on:

- a. Authenticity of message, tell people the truth even if difficult. They will appreciate your authentic approach even if they don't like aspects of it, don't tell people what they want to hear. This way, they will trust you more.
  - b. Consistency of message is critical. Don't change the message depending on the audience.
  - c. Completeness of message: Give full information as they become available, don't withhold information as an expression of your power, it make your staff more vulnerable as they won't know
  - d. Bust myths all the time and publicly dispel rumours
8. **Staff Reflection:** Provide an ongoing, methodical, deliberate and regular opportunity for staff to reflect with their peers. Listen to what is being said and respond to it even if you don't agree. This will help improve the emotional wellbeing of staff and establish a highly effective and low cost support network.
  9. Establish joint projects and working groups from across the two (or more) colleges to help build bridges and remove barriers. These can be projects for future developments and/or to deal with existing issues. These need to be meaningful with clear deliverables.
  10. It is important to remember that leadership is about providing a shared vision for the whole organisation to thrive and succeed and not about an individual or a group of individuals being right, heroic, charismatic, always have the answers and never get things wrong, that is non-human! Nor is leadership about people's ego and sense of self-worth.
  11. All key decisions on systems and processes need to be given a reason why so that staff can buy into these changes. It is best that such decisions are taken in a way that align to the institutions missions and staff values, this way you will not have much disagreement.
  12. **Management Structure:** The organisational management structure will form a significant demonstration of your ability to set the organisation on a path for success. Make sure that you:
    - a. Meaningfully consult on the future management structure of the organisation. Nothing trumps being honest and open with staff.
    - b. Have an open and transparent selection process
  13. The process for selection and appointment to the new structure needs to be open, transparent and objective with external scrutiny if possible. For example, inviting a specialist to conduct one or more strands of the assessment centre and inviting one or more external individuals to be part of the interview panels. This way, staff will trust leaders even if the decisions and the appointment are not what they personally want.
  14. Be careful about language and throw away comments that are said in the heat of the moment, they stick, institutional memory is long.
  15. Create working groups that are focussed on specific aspects of culture such as trust, communication, decision making, equitable distribution of resources

FE Sector Wide:

Key findings:

1. Policy in FE drives practice
2. There is no meaningful FE policy nor has been for the best part of a century (Bailey and Unwin, 2014; Orr, 2018)
3. The current FE policy does not achieve its policy aims

The aforementioned key FE sector findings lead to consider the following recommendations:

1. The sector needs a well-articulated sector voice owned and convened by the sector, with the following provisos:
  - a. This sector voice cannot be facilitated and/or convened by another body, this is the most important lesson of history
2. Leadership in the sector needs:
  - a. To have a big concern around a collective leadership role for the sector, Leadership cannot and must not occupy itself with institutional matters only, though these are critically significant, but also, acutely importantly with sector-wide matters so as it is able to articulate a position for FE and influence policy
  - b. The essence of effective and successful leadership is its ability to lead change efficaciously with a real concern for the human impact by focussing on emotional wellbeing, fragility and building trust. This needs a nuanced approach that utilises a distributed (sometimes referred to as echo leadership) approach rather than what is popularly promoted by business schools as the heroic, “I say you do”, approach. Kotter’s theories do not work in an FE setting. As it happens, Kotter has been discredited for other sectors too, see (Hughes, 2011; By, Hughes and Ford, 2016).
  - c. FE’s “Catholic” approach to policy (Orr, 2009), needs to be replaced by a critical approach to policy implementation informed by experience and evidence based research
  - d. Evidence based research needs to occupy a central role in informing practice
3. Leadership teams (including governing bodies) need to work with sector bodies and organisations to help shape FE leadership discourse through
  - a. Working with research organisations and academics to help inform discourse, skills and knowhow of the ways in which sector leadership needs to develop
  - b. Working with key bodies such as the ETF to help develop the