



HIGHER IN FURTHER EDUCATION PROJECT

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Higher-ness or Further-ness. Classifying Higher Education in Further Education in England (HFE) at the Interface: Boundary Work, Boundary Objects and Boundary Spanning.

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William Gourley

‘ “They will never agree,” said the nineteenth-century wit Reverend Sidney Smith when he saw two women shouting at each other from houses on opposite sides of an Edinburgh street, “They are arguing from different premises.” ‘

(Quoted in Thompson, 2000)

Introduction

This paper argues that the delivery of higher education (HE) in further education colleges (FEC's) in England (HFE), and what may constitute the 'higher-ness' of HFE as distinct from its 'further-ness', is contested terrain and that HFE is a sub domain of post compulsory education that is producing hybrid organisational forms.

It will be proposed that there has not been much academic discussion of what HFE actually is from a conceptual, philosophical, epistemological and ontological perspective; nor has there been a sustained development of theoretical explorations of the distinctiveness of HFE in contrast to traditional models of HE provision. Thus HFE has been under theorised, under researched and arguably under valued. Policy developments have consequently been based upon a limited and predominantly thin evidence base (Parry and Thompson, 2002).

It is consequently important to develop theoretical tools that contribute to unpacking the conceptual essence of HFE and to construct analytical frameworks that move beyond past administrative legacies and terminologies. The question is how to conceptualise this process of hybridisation at the HFE

interface and what analytical framework might be useful for the purpose of understanding transactions and exchanges across its boundaries.? This paper can only be a preliminary and highly provisional point of departure for the future development of a more substantial theoretical understanding.

Dualisms, dichotomies and taxonomies are of limited use in moving towards this goal although they offer a start in clearing away the conceptual and analytical undergrowth necessary for theoretical development. The institutional configurations and boundaries that link and divide FE and HE and the boundary crossings that connect its dual systems, structures, cultures, practices and shifting institutional contexts, have all left a terminological legacy that is often confusing or at least conceptually muddled.

This legacy has been inherited from the different traditions of FE and HE and these have yet to be adequately theorised as a reconfigured form of HFE provision. Moreover, the policy shifts that HFE has been subject to for the last 15 to 20 years have generated significant paradoxes, tensions and anomalies in HFE delivery that impact on the potential success of recent policy initiatives to widen participation in HE in general through the targeted growth of HFE mainly at sub degree level. These claims have both strategic and operational implications. Consequently they are important for understanding the mismatches between strategic policy intent and operational practices and the different strength and weaknesses of strategic approaches to organising HFE as an integrated or distinct form of HE provision.

The policy ambiguity that preceded this state of affairs will be elaborated on here. Conceptualisation will also move beyond simple dichotomies and dualism that contrast FE and HE while trying to explain both what they have in common and how they might evolve in the future.

This paper will explore how border or boundary activities at the HFE interface can be conceptualised and theorised and explore the dynamics of boundary maintenance and boundary spanning mechanisms across institutional and organisational contexts. It will briefly investigate the nomenclature of the terminological legacies, administrative, bureaucratic and other conventional inheritances that define contemporary HFE and it will claim that in the long run these are inadequate for understanding HFE as an analytical construct. An alternative conceptual and analytical model will be presented that offers a contribution to an area that is under theorised and up till now marginal to conceptual debates about the nature of HE irrespective of where it is delivered.

Classifying at the HFE Interface: Dichotomies and Dualities

The classification of HFE provision in terms of a coherent bounded set of inter dependent and inter related systems, sectors, sub sectors or domains, with associated internal system of classification and stratification, is not suited to the use of dualistic theorising or the use of dichotomies and continua for exploring its essence because they cannot capture the relationality and context of boundary crossing at its interface nor its dynamics.

The classification and categorisation of the systems, structures, processes and organisational forms of which HFE is a part, mirrors and reflects the structures that are embedded in the existing social relations and practices through which these acts of categorisation take place and the terminological inheritance and legacies of the past. This may seem an unremarkable point. However, what is significant about dualistic and dichotomised typologies is that it is the anomalies that do not fit in these formal systems of classification that may be of the greatest theoretical significance in understanding future trajectories of change and that it is these anomalies that are the most instructive for understanding the HFE interface. After all one claim is that HFE is a liminal activity betwixt and between what in the past would be called FE as distinct from HE. The administrative and conventional distinctions made in discussing HFE does not necessarily match its current configurations and the emergence of new organisational forms that constitute hybrids drawn from two hitherto separate HE and FE domains.

The current process of classification in this HFE landscape will not only reflect existing power relations and dependencies between collaborating organisations but also inherited ones and in the process of classification and categorisation these relations, the structural asymmetries and imbalances of power between HEI's and FEC's delivering HFE are reproduced and reinforced. Moreover, the paradoxes, anomalies and contradictions of operating at the HFE interface are filtered through the

concrete formal and informal social relations in which these practices are embedded and the coping mechanisms of practitioners for dealing with the often conflicting demands of a system that itself is ambiguous in terms of its identity.

In HFE the ability to present ones own dominant or hegemonic system of classification against those of others tends to reflect these asymmetrical power relations between FE and HE and the relative ability of actors in these different domains to engage in the process of classification at the boundaries of HFE while reflecting vested interests and organisational dispositions. In HFE the present has become locked into the past and a path dependent trajectory that has institutionalised HFE as a subordinate and marginalised sub sector of HE provision that exhibits an transactional asymmetrical and subordinate power imbalance across the HFE interface.

One of the problems is that this past has been dichotomised as a set of simplistic dualisms that have become reified as characterising two distinct FE and HE sectors as objectively distinct when in essence no such distinction can be meaningfully made at the contemporary boundaries of HFE.

At the end of the day there are limits to the efficacy of dichotomies and dualisms for conceptualising the fluidity, dynamic, iterative and constant processes of organising and reorganising at the boundaries of the HFE interface. Consequently the static dichotomies and reified boundaries that aim to distinguish similarity and differences between FE and HE, the discontinuities of practice between the two and the distinct past cultures and traditions as they impact on the delivery of HFE, are analytical constructs that cannot reflect the dynamic and dialectic of organising at the boundaries of HFE. Thus there is a need to understand the processes of constant organising and reconfiguring at the HFE interface relationally and contextually as a process of organising and as a social and historical construct.

Dualism and typologies in research are restricted in the sense of what they can help us conceptualise in what are in effect dynamic and turbulent systems. In essence dichotomies reinforce the structure agency dichotomy and amplify distinctiveness and separation of phenomena at the cost of understanding them relationally. Dichotomies are essentially oppositional constructs that emphasise the static rather than the dynamic. They often imply a causality that is deterministic, linear, reductionist and mechanistic. Continua perform a similar function. Change is incremental and linear and across the same physical plane and in the same linear and temporal conceptual frame.

Disengagement and de-contextualisation from situational factors are features of such dualisms because they divorce action from context and consequence from intent. They lack a means of connecting logics of practice in HFE with the intended and unintended consequences of policy implementation. Even with the representation of HFE as a continuum whereby institutional and organisational change is conceptualised as incremental and linear moving from point A to point B in the same linear and temporal conceptual frame, it is of limited use in capturing the dynamics of organising across boundaries that are fluid and constantly reconfigured and the resultant tensions and contradictions.

While conceptualisation and categorisation inevitably involve the demarcation of boundaries and the categorisation of the surrounding social world taxonomies, dichotomies and continuums are useful starting points. They link together hitherto unconnected phenomenon in ways that are initially not apparent. They codify the similar and demarcate the distinct according to theoretical principles of selection. Yet they do not offer an explanation of the iterative processes of boundary construction and boundary crossing.

Thus there is a need to cope theoretically with the paradoxes and tensions that occur at the boundaries of HFE and to understand the significance of residual categories that are neither HE nor FE but both and neither at the same time. Classifications cannot incorporate this level of pradox, contradiction and anomaly.

Classification systems impose structure and thus influence cognition, action and behaviour. But systems of classification can also be understood in terms of anomaly and categories and classifications that do not fit or are out of place. One well known example of an analysis of classification systems rooted in social anthropology and the work of Douglas (1982), examines the biblical text Leviticus as a system of classification that incorporates strategies for dealing with anomaly in systems of classification. It is proposed to use it here in analysing HFE as a system of classification rooted to and

embedded in practice and the structure of social organisation that typifies HFE as a 'bounded' system in which anomaly is pervasive and which HFE appears to use Douglas' phrase as 'matter out of place'.

Treating HFE as a coherent system of classification that reflect dominant modal patterns of organising and interaction within HFE and in particular through emphasising the anomalies that do not fit into the system of classification represents 'matter out of place' to use Douglas' term and can reveal power balances and asymmetrical relations. It is at these boundaries that the anomalies are most stark and reveal discontinuities in expectations and understanding between FE and HE practitioners.

Boundaries are socially constructed and as dualistically conceptualised they are exclusion devices that emphasise difference and categorical distinctions that cannot grasp the dialectical process of iteration and of paradox, tension and anomaly when dual sectors and structures interact. Dichotomies essentially reify boundaries and cannot capture the provisional and ambiguous nature of emerging boundaries. What is more, boundaries are social constructs that have a symbolic as well as a functional purpose.

What is needed is something that allows us look at boundary dynamics and practices contextually and relationally and as a constant process of organising and reconfiguring of boundaries. Contextual factors need to be integrated into the analysis and institutional historical path dependent trajectories considered as a kind of fossilised institutional and organisational palimpsest. Indeed contextual and institutional factors fundamentally shape boundary practices. Without context then boundary has no analytical purchase.

Consequently systems of classification found in HFE and more generally in the public sector should be addressed holistically and relationally and in a historical as well as a contemporary context. The positioning and positionality of relevant key actors also need consideration in the context of an HFE system that consists of overlapping historical sectors with their attendant terminological and historical legacies. The dynamics of agent or actors strategies, positioning and behaviour in practice, is set in a broader institutional and organisational landscape of which each agent is structurally related and positioned in relation to every other: although with differing degrees of access to resources and power and ability to influence the policy direction of HFE. In essence HFE is contested terrain.

Classifying at the HFE Interface: Boundaries and anomalies

As argued earlier many attempts to engage with what HFE actually is have been largely based upon bureaucratic and academic conventions and the inherited historical terminological legacies of the past. There has been little discussion of what HFE actually is based upon philosophical or epistemological grounds. Yet it may be the very slipperiness of HFE as a liminal activity located at the intersection or boundaries that mark its theoretical significance for understanding the future direction of widening participation in HE. It is there that hybridisation occurs.

The classification of HFE is most interesting at the boundaries and interfaces where there is an overlap of responsible bodies, funding agencies and quality assurance bodies and other intermediary bodies. And the historical and administrative terminological legacies of the past, both formal and informal, cloud the issue. For example in England, although the binary divide between the universities and the old polytechnics was abolished in 1992 the use of the terms old or traditional universities to refer to pre 1992 universities and new universities to refer to post 1992 universities is pervasive both in policy documents and common parlance today.

HFE tends to be most closely associated with the 'new universities' and partnerships or collaboration, with FEC's delivering HFE, although not solely so and mainly with those organisations with an access orientation and historical tradition of widening participation. Consequently, formal classifications are over ridden by informal classifications and logics in practice that stress the tensions between the socialisation function of HE in reproducing elites and the utilitarian function of widening access to the broader population. In this sense HE has always been a positional good (Marginson, 1997) despite massification and the rhetoric of upgrading the nations skill base. Organisations define themselves in contrast to other organisations in similar sectors and identify with some more than others. Organisational dispositions are positioning dispositions and that can only be understood in the context in which dispositions are enacted in tandem with other organisations to which they are oriented. Consequently it is possible to conceptualise the context in which organising takes place across the HFE interface as an interconnected organisational role structure. This point will be developed later using the

concept of an organisational field as an analytical device to explore the positioning of organisations within the HFE field.

The removal of FE from local authority control in 1992 following the removal of the polytechnics from them in 1988 meant they were neither public nor private. Nevertheless, as mentioned above informal classifications into new and old universities remained pervasive. Despite the removal of the official binary divide an informal classification and mechanism of classification remained entrenched in practice. In HFE both the formal and informal processes of classification and categorisation draw on different traditions, cultures and past operating practices and this is a stubborn legacy in trying to unpack just what HFE is as distinct from FE and HE.

Moreover, formal distinctions between the public and private sectors are of limited relevance as there are elements of both at work in HFE. And in terms of the tendency of the English to demarcate FE and HE as distinct sectors some argue that this is increasingly of less relevance today as the boundaries blur and mutate. Thus making distinctions between FE and HE as distinct sectors may have had its day (Parry and Thompson, 2003).

HE and FE and HFE are mixes of components or elements from the public and private sectors and, in the case of the later, it is a hybrid that may be leading to the emergence of new organisational forms. Indeed, most boundaries are permeable and mark the dynamic site or interstices of exchanges that cross conventional classifications, typifications, boundaries and divides. Dualistic approaches and the use of dichotomies are limited in capturing these transgressions, anomalies, paradoxes and transactions and exchanges across this HFE interface.

Apart from the terminological legacies and administratively driven systems of classifying HFE inherited from the past, terms such as franchising and consortium are used in policy documents to refer to variants of structured collaborative provision somewhat loosely and can refer to different things when discussing HFE. As components of classification systems they are treated here as emic rather than etic terms. Yet there needs to be analytical and conceptual clarity about what the terms actually mean. Their very ambiguity betrays conceptual misunderstandings about, for example, what franchising is as an analytical construct.

The business format model of franchising drawn from the private sector is a common metaphor used when discussing franchising in HFE but it has its limitations in terms of its applicability and usage for HFE as an analytical construct. The implications of this are drawn out in a separate paper.

If the claim that HFE is a hybrid is to be evidenced and placed in a historical context, then what have past policy borrowings, elements and terminological legacies contributed to that project? So what has been the significance of these contributions to understanding the current configurations of HFE and what is their analytical significance for understanding the contemporary HFE environment? In other words are there aspects of the history of HFE that are in the language of institutional theory path dependent?

In order to answer this question it is necessary to retrace the hidden histories and absences and silences of the emergence of HFE in England (Parry and Thompson, 2002). HFE in a recognisable modern form is not new and can be possibly traced back to the origins of the mechanics institutes from the 1830's onwards in England following earlier Scottish models and initiatives. These mechanics institutes were initially meant to provide what today would be called higher level, or perhaps to use today's terminology intermediate, short cycle vocational higher education. However, what is new about the current trajectories of institutional and organisational change in HFE is that it has become more visible in policy terms, relatively more high profile than in the past and from the government's perspective more relevant as a feature of contemporary post compulsory educational policy for economic survival and health. In effect, it has moved from the margins of an HE system that in England had always evolved in a rather ad hoc and unplanned manner to a more central but still subordinate component of a wider system of HE provision. Today HFE is an important vehicle for the expansion of HE; but many would argue a junior partner in terms of power asymmetries, resources and policy leadership when compared to traditional HE.

This transition from what Parry and Thompson (2002) refer to as 'low policy' to 'high policy' in the delivery of HFE took place in the mid 1990's following and marked by the watershed that was the

Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997): an investigation into the future of HE in the countries of the UK. In this paper the focus will be solely on England, however.

This established the principle of assigning a more prominent role for intermediary level HE qualifications below the sub degree level in contributing to the governments proposed target of having 50% of eligible 18 to 30 year olds in HE by the year 2010. It also favoured the development of more structured forms of collaborative provision of HFE in partnership between HEI's and FEC's and other stakeholders. The aim was to move away from the market led competitive ethos that had marked the early 1990's, in particular through franchising, and the associated policy uncertainties and stop go and short term initiatives of the time. Although still based on a relatively thin evidence base on the nature of HFE provision (Parry and Thompson, 2002) by the time of the Dearing Report it was evident that HFE provision had not been unproblematic and had in a small number of cases gave rise to concerns.

This was re-enforced by the transfer of responsibilities for funding HFE, irrespective of where it was delivered, to the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) from 1999 to 2000 and the transfer of quality assurance procedures based on peer review by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAAHE) to collaborative partnerships at least in part to develop a more substantive evidence base of the nature and characteristics of HFE. This was somewhat of a culture shock for many HFE providers who were more familiar with the inspection regime of the Further Education Funding Council (Underwood and Collin, 2000).and under its successors the Learning Skills Council and the Office for Standards in Education and Adult Learning Inspectorate .and had to learn new 'rules of the game' for audit.

Following the 2003 White paper (DfES, 2003) it was reinforced that structured collaborative partnerships for the delivery of HFE would be favoured largely through funding incentives and through mechanisms that prioritised indirectly funded franchising and consortiums as preferred organisational forms, although in a small number of cases it was recognised that direct provision would be appropriate.

That set the scene for the development of a maturing HFE organisational field and the institutionalisation of preferred organisational forms based upon structured collaboration and inter organisational partnerships between HEI's and FEC's delivering HFE. This phase will be explored conceptually and analytically below but with this caveat. The historical legacies, terminologies and systems of past categorisation and classification used in FE and HE in the past, are of limited use in the new world of HFE due to the different systems of data gathering and statistical sources that have their roots in different traditions of data collection and different priorities on behalf of responsible sectoral bodies. In many ways they were arguing from different premises, to different audiences and with different voices. This historical and terminological legacy requires a reconfiguration of classifying and categorising at the boundaries and interface of HFE as a prelude to building a more in depth understanding of HFE that is conceptual and theoretical This is a research lacunae in this field of study of post compulsory education. Structured collaborative HFE provision within an emergent and maturing HFE organisational field is explored below.

Institutional Theory, Neo-Institutionalism and Organisational Fields

If theorising structured collaboration in HFE is a neglected art in terms of theoretical understanding it is also the site of paradox and contradictions that originate in the dual structures, systems and distinct traditions and cultures that marked FE and HE in the past. For example, Parry and Thompson (2003) in one of the more comprehensive analysis of policy in HFE point out a dearth of research in this area and the thin evidence base upon which policy had been made and previously addressed. In this section an attempt will be made to conceptualise and theorise the dynamics of structured collaborative arrangements, the tensions and dualities that pervades it and lessons to be learnt for delivering HFE. The potential for the emergence of new organisational forms embedded in an HFE organisational field is explored in terms of the contemporary landscape of HFE and the shifting boundaries and tectonic plates at its boundaries.

Organisational fields and Boundaries

The field metaphor will be used to this end. It draws on Bourdieu's work (Bourdieu, 1977, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) and Martin's (2003) interpretation of the concept of fields, and on a seminal article

by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), who themselves drew on Bourdieu, to conceptualise and analyse the emergence of organisational fields and the tendency of organisational forms within fields to increasingly resemble each other as a consequence of what they refer to as isomorphic institutional pressures. The most prevalent types of isomorphic institutional pressure are coercive isomorphism, normative isomorphism and mimetic.

For DiMaggio and Powell (1991) an organisational field only exists to the extent it is institutionalised. Consequently and following their new institutionalist approach institutional theory is drawn upon here in order to help understand the dynamics of structured collaboration and partnerships in HFE and to conceptualise its shifting boundaries and the multiple exchanges that take place across its interface.

To begin with and towards this end one definition of an institution is utilised and is conceptualised as: “the rules of the game in a society, or more formally, ..the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction.” North (1990, p 3). Moreover, an institution, and the process of institutionalisation, is conceptually distinct from an organisation which is effectively an arena of embedded practice that has become routinised, habitual and a taken for granted convention.

In understanding these institutionalised rules both FE and HE need a shared understanding of the ‘rules of the game’ at the HFE interface and this is not always straightforward. Structured collaborative HFE therefore has taken time to become embedded in practices that are common to both prior FE and HE sub sectors before the blurring of their boundaries and the emergence of a maturing contemporary organisational field. Later in this paper the concept of boundary objects will be introduced in order to conceptualise the transactions that occur across the HFE interface and to explore the processes of institutionalisation that result in embedded or embodied practice.

Another definition of institutions by Scott argues that:

“(i)nstitutions consist of cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior. Institutions are transported by various carriers—cultures, structures, and routines—and they operate at multiple levels of jurisdiction” (Scott, 1995 p 33)

Institutions thus bring predictability to economic exchanges and pattern human and organisational behaviour in regular ways that generate and embed common meanings in inter organisational practices through the processes of the structuration of an organisational field: in this case of a maturing HFE organisational field. The concept of an organisational field and its applicability for understanding the emergence of an HFE organisational field is explored in more analytical depth below.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p148) define organisational fields as “those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life.” These include key suppliers, regulators and consumers of products and services. In HFE the state is the key regulator and quasi markets the institutionalised context in which consumers and producers meet.

Thus an organisational field only exist to the extent that is the outcome of a process of institutionalisation and that these processes become embedded in practice. They become conventional, habitual and routine types of formal and informal behaviour. The boundaries of an organisational field cannot be determined in advance. The concept is used as a sensitivising analytical device for exploring the processes of institutionalisation whereby practices emerge and become embedded in logics of action and practice. These cannot be assumed a priori but are empirical questions.

The boundaries of an organisational field are social and cultural constructs, infused with value and symbolism and demarcated through common systems of meaning, classification and categorisation that delimit the boundaries and the internal dynamics of the field. Thus a field is not a reified bounded construct or ‘object’. Commonality of meaning and practice emerges gradually with the maturing of the field and maturing organisational fields will exhibit similar characteristics. At the same time there will be discontinuities of perspective, meaning and interest that are significant for understanding the internal stratification of fields and positionality of organisations within the field.

Firstly, according to Powell and DiMaggio (1991) as a field matures, there will be an increased level of interaction between groups and organisations within the field. Secondly, over time there will evolve a common meaning system that members of the organisational field share in terms of a common

orientation or common point of reference. Thirdly there will be an increase in the information load to which members of the field are exposed. Finally coalitions and alliance will tend to form within the field over common interests. It will be argued that these are conditions met by the emergence of an HFE organisational field.

Thus a field is a complex and bounded set of social relations and associated group and organisational dispositions, interests and preferences, operating in a complex and iterative dynamic that is mutually orientated to a common organisational context within the field and an emergent structured set of positions and dispositions. These dispositions are embodied as patterns of strategic behaviour and positioning that result in more or less stable patterns of organising at the boundaries and within the field. This positioning is contested and strategic and is effectively a struggle over resources and assets that are located in the field. These resources can be material or immaterial. Positioning within an organisational field can only be understood historically holistically, relationally and in context.

Fields are dynamic and constantly evolving and dissolving and cannot simply be conceptualised as a dichotomy of included and excluded members, or through dichotomised markers of inclusion and exclusion, or by starkly delimiting its boundaries as a static divide. In that sense dualism has its limits.

They are also in a constant process of formation, configuration and reconfiguration and at the boundaries there is a constant cycle of organising and reorganising. The demarcation of a field's boundary needs to be set against this fluidity and these countervailing tendencies to articulate, determine and dissolve the boundaries of the field operating simultaneously. Therefore boundaries can only be understood situationally, relationally and in context as embedded practice that has become routinised as convention.

The incumbents of an organisational field will interact in meaningful ways that are oriented to the behaviour of each other but do so in a contested manner and in a struggle over the acquisitions of resources with the other incumbents. Field members thus position themselves vis a vis other members. Heterogeneity and homogeneity co-exist inasmuch that organisational and group identities are so mediated as socially constructed and contested practice. In terms of structured collaborative partnerships such as those found in HFE there are overlapping areas of commonality of meaning structures and processes and divergent ones too. Consequently the HFE organisational field is characterised by meetings at the boundaries of what were past sectors and in the context of the emergence of a maturing organisational field.

The boundaries of the HFE organisational field have shifted considerably in the last twenty years or so as HFE has moved from the margins to a more centrally designated role within HE as a result in shifts in government policy. Inasmuch as a field only exists to the extent that it has become institutionalised and as practice the process of institutionalisation is a crucial component of understanding the emergence and maturation of fields. We need to understand why a policy or initiative does become institutionalised as practice and does not become institutionalised or becomes dysfunctional. This will impact on the ability for theory to inform whether certain organisational forms contribute to widening participation in HE through their dispersion in the HFE organisational field or whether they mitigate against it.

The next section outlines an analytical approach that draws on the analysis of boundaries in the context of wider systems of classification. It will draw upon a model developed by Douglas', her grid-group model, that is used as a heuristic device to contextualise the boundaries of HFE and ways of organising at the boundaries. This is then applied to understanding the dynamics of the HFE organisational field. Secondly work on boundary objects and boundary work is discussed. The key question is how can the same problem (as a common HFE problem of widening participation) be perceived differently by HE and FE or in common. The answer is partly through boundary objects.

Grid-group and Boundary Objects: Organising at the Boundaries.

Structured collaboration between organisations within HFE generate styles of organising and patterns of group interaction that takes place around shared practice and boundaries in the HFE organisational field; but at the same time partners retain their distinct identities as autonomous organisations. Boundary events, boundary objects (see below for definition), roles and processes mediate these shared inter organisational practices. These patterns of interaction and the 'rules of the game' that oversee

them are the building blocks of what Powell and DiMaggio refer to as a recognised area of institutional life. The grid group heuristic outlined below helps to capture these dynamics at the boundaries of HFE through providing a framework to systematically identify common forms of organising at the boundaries of inter organisational collaboration within the HFE organisational field. It is claimed that in the spirit of a form of constrained relativism there are a limited number of ways of organising and that cycles of organising at the HFE interface are in a constant state of flux that oscillates between these.

At the beginning of this paper the limitation of dichotomies and dualism for exploring HFE was considered. Here one heuristic device based upon the original work of Douglas (1982) and will be adapted to explore the HFE interface and the boundaries between HE and FE as one means of moving beyond dichotomies. Douglas' work has been built upon to explore among other things workplace deviance (Mars, 1982), organisational culture (Altman and Baruch, 1998, Hendry, 1998), political culture (Thompson, Ellis and Wildansky, 1990), public administration (Hood, 1998), governance (Perri 6 et al, 2002) and policy formation (Ney, 2006).

Originating in the work of Durkheim Douglas's grid group approach is used as a heuristic device rather than a full blown theory for understanding the interaction of two modal aspects of social organisation found in all societies. The first is the realm of moral regulation and what Douglas refers to as the grid dimension and the second in that of social solidarities which Douglas terms the group dimension.

Interestingly the original classification represented in Durkheim's work as mechanical solidarity (the principle of organisation typifying simple pre modern societies) versus organic solidarity (the principle governing complex and structurally interdependent complex societies) was itself a dichotomy. Other dichotomies regularly found in the social sciences such as traditional versus modern, urban as opposed to rural, 'gemeinschaft' and 'gessellschaft' are subject to the same limitations elaborated upon earlier. Douglas' model is an attempt to move beyond dichotomies to examine the iterative and dialectical interactions of the grid –group dimensions in a single context, holistically and in terms of the mutually reinforcing effects of stable organisational forms that represent institutionalisation. For her the categorisation of things represent a homology with the social relations in which classifications take place.

Thus Douglas identified two dimensions of social life that could be found in any society: that of grid and group. The grid dimension represented that degree to which individuals are subject to externally imposed rules and regulations and associated role prescriptions while accepting them as legitimate: a sort of common understanding of the 'rules of the game' as legitimate practices. In high grid contexts these are highly constraining and encompassing in their influence on behaviour with high levels of role differentiation clearly demarcated into fixed appropriate behaviour. The group dimension reflects the degree to which individuals are incorporated into bounded social groups through patterns of mutuality that impact on their interactions with other groups and the extent that group membership excludes others and can sanction the behaviour of members.

Together grid and group form a matrix of typical configurations of social organisation and associated regulatory structures (both formal and informal) that are institutionalised as embedded practice that reflects preferred ways of organising and associated 'worldviews' that sustain these preferred ways of organising. In strong grid and group contexts behaviour can be highly constrained and is strongly embedded in associated social relations and patterns of group interaction. In weak grid and group contexts behaviour is weakly embedded and overlap with alternative and multiple forms of organising.

The dispositions, perceptions and preferences of organisational agents and actors within the HFE organisational field are not neutral but are embedded in the social structures and systems of classification that frame the institutional and organisational landscape of HFE. Interests, preferences and 'cultural biases' do not emerge a priori but are socially constructed categories and rooted in historical experience. They therefore need to be understood both synchronically and diachronically. The grid dimension tries to capture these and the group dimension helps assess the extent to which the 'rules of the game' have become embedded as practice.

The original model has been applied in a number of context that move beyond its original purpose as a comparative device for identifying a number of limited ways of organising in human cultures (as a form of constrained relativism). In a similar vein the grid-group heuristic is used here to analyse the

HFE interface as a system of classification of HFE embedded in the social relations of HFE providers in the HFE organisational field. It thus acts as a heuristic device to track the trajectories of institutional and organisational change in HFE, shifts in dispositions and the associated organisational forms, incentives and preferences found in the field. It helps maps the constraints and options of all possible worlds within the HFE organisational field. In other word it frames and contextualising boundary crossing activities and organising at the boundaries of HFE.

All classification systems impose structure on behaviour (and here by inference of HFE providers) and thus in general influence the cognition, dispositions, actions and behaviour of relevant organisations and stakeholders in the HFE organisational field. Systems of classification are also pervasive contexts for understanding the function of boundaries and interfaces between two domains not least because they bridge different systems of classification originating in different HE and FE sectors or domains. Through exploring systems of classifying at the HFE interface by using Douglas' grid group matrix to investigate the regulation of HFE as captured through the grid dimension and the patterns of social interaction and social organisation captured through group dimension that exist in the HFE organisational field the implicit may be made explicit and understanding of organising at the HFE boundaries advanced. What is more a limited number of permutations of grid and group can map configurations and reconfigurations of elements of organising across HFE.

Combining grid and group together four quadrants are identified. Strong grid and strong group configurations produce ways of organising and regulating the behaviour of HFE providers in the HFE organisational field that is labelled hierarchy. Weak grid with strong group produces an egalitarian form of organising typical of some sects. Weak grid and weak group produces individualistic patterns of organising. The fourth quadrant of strong grid and weak group produces a form of isolated organisational orientations that represents weak or atomised patterns of organising. Some theorists have identified a fifth type, the hermit which is a form of retreat from any organisation at all. However, given that this paper is looking at organising at the boundaries of inter organisational collaboration within HFE that is not a viable option for this analysis. Thus the following patterns of organising across the HFE interface are captured.

Grid

<p>Fatalism</p> <p>(isolated atomism)</p> <p>Apathy Ritualism Isolation Peripheral Risk as random</p>	<p>Hierarchy</p> <p>(bureaucracy)</p> <p>Rule following Standardisation Status orders (Positionality) Centralisation Risk averse</p>
<p>Individualism</p> <p>(negotiation / bargaining)</p> <p>Markets Entrepreneurship Discovery processes Structural holes Risk as opportunity</p>	<p>Egalitarianism</p> <p>(sects / community of practices)</p> <p>Mutuality Networks Clans Enclaves Pooling risk</p>

Group

Figure 1

Permutations and configurations at the interfaces of the quadrants

No one form of organising at the HFE boundary exists in isolation from the others and for the most part they are contested and in conflict with each other. Each style of organising is to some extent defined in contrast to every other and identity resides in categorisation and difference as a consequence. In order to explore the potential permutations and configurations and degrees of integration, difference and hybridisation that do exist between the quadrants, the distinct characteristics of each quadrant is outlined schematically as a prelude to conceptualising the interaction between them. This is a prelude to exploring the boundary crossing processes commonly found in HFE.

Hierarchy (Strong grid-strong group)

Hierarchical forms of organising tend to be linked to organisational contexts that are rule bound with clear lines of authority and tied to compliance and system maintenance. Hierarchical structures try to reduce and control uncertainty through standardisation and rule following. At the HFE interface pressures will be towards system alignment either through the assimilation of the two systems of the HFE partners into some kind of hybrid or through the dominance of one over the other. As the HEI has ultimate responsibility for QA it ultimately has the upper hand.

Egalitarian / Sect (Strong group-weak grid)

The egalitarian or sect mode of organising is based on some form of consensus or commonality and patterns of participation. Communities of Practice are an example of this mode as are some peer based research networks. Group boundaries are strongly drawn although this may be subtle and cross individual organisational boundaries. Boundary objects or boundary events are mechanisms of HFE organising. Risk and uncertainty is pooled or shared rather like an insurance policy. The goal of this form of organising is to generate synergies that benefit all within the group (but not necessarily outside of it).

Individualism (Low grid-low group)

Individualism operates in an organisational context through which rules are highly provisional and constantly negotiable and in which there are few constraints on behaviour. As a mode of organising individualism utilises uncertainty as an opportunity for expanding or exploiting opportunities. HFE collaborations may be a mechanism for expanding into new markets and there is always an element of competition mixed with collaboration in terms of HFE provision.

Fatalism (High grid-High Group)

Fatalism is a rule bound mode of organising with high levels of distrust and isolation in evidence. Uncertainty is capricious and a matter of fate and therefore uncontrollable. In HFE terms this mode can be seen as somewhat of an after thought (some authors refer to it as the passive quadrant as contrasted to the other three active quadrants) and refers to peripheral HFE organisations. However, their 'peripheral-ness' needs to be understood in the context of the HFE organisational field and their power to influence of incumbents. They may also tend to have small amounts of HFE which may not be their priority. This quadrant can also be conceptualised as a latent quadrant than may become active through some other event or crisis and cross over into one of the other quadrants.

Configuring and reconfiguring organisation at the HFE boundary.

In any case all of the four modal forms of organisation will coexist in some degree and are dependent for their very existence by being able to define themselves as a quadrant and in contrast to the others. Consequently fatalism is an inversion of all the other forms of organising and perhaps in some cases an interstitial point in a liminal progression from one form of organising to another. A major shift in funding incentives can re-orientate fatalist organisations to move towards the HFE centre and to activate latent potential.

The final point that all forms of organising identified in the four quadrants used here coexist with each other is known as the 'requisite variety' condition. They either reinforce each other or undermine themselves if the balance between quadrants shifts and becomes unstable. One of the forms of

organising will dominate at any one time but each one has its own weaknesses that to some extent are compensated for by the others. Each has its blind spots or system blindness towards other forms of organising.

In HFE too much individualism can result in the weakening of the checks and balances that the others quadrants provide. Arguably this is what happened in a small number of cases in the unstructured phase of franchising in the pre Dearing phase when opportunism took place in some HFE collaborations. In FE the small number of scandals that emerged after incorporation could be analysed as the result of the breakdown of the previous checks and balances pre-existing incorporation under the LEA system disappearing without adequate checks and balances having time to bed down in the new system of FE replacing it.

Too many egalitarian forms of organising can result in delayed decision making or ossified decision thus making processes and egalitarian forms are prone to faction and fission as it is difficult to provide centralised leadership. The lack of internal differentiation within an egalitarian group can only be superficial as individual differences will always exist. However, to the extent that differentiation is institutionalised it is likely to reconfigure mixes of the other three forms of organising within enclaves within the sect along the lines of Weberian status groups or along a reputational axis based upon peer evaluation. Some would argue HE is notorious for this. Indeed, that it is a mix of individualism and enclave based proto-hierarchy masquerading as egalitarianism or collegiality.

Too much hierarchy can lead to group think and a lack of sensitivity to rapidly changing organisational environments that are turbulent and often unstable. Rigid implementation of rules will be ineffective in environments in which discretion and initiative are required. Hierarchies are not responsive to the turbulent organisational changes influencing HFE and lag behind early developments. They are less significant at the early stages of development of HFE provision and an emerging HFE organisational field because they cannot innovate and are constrained by strong grid contexts that restrict their sensibility and awareness of alternative modes of organising or behaving.

Moreover, it is at the boundaries of the quadrants that organising across boundaries is most prone to tensions and it is likely that it will be there that the tensions, paradoxes and conflicts inevitable in dual systems of organising will emerge.

The grid group heuristic itself evolved from Douglas' attempt to understand how systems of classification and categorisation reflected the natural and social order in human cultures. At the same time it was her study of pollution and the role of anomalies and paradoxes in these systems of classification as sites of danger and threat to the social order that can analogically be transferred to the study of anomaly and paradox in systems of HFE classification. These are most prominent at the intersection of the four quadrants of the grid group model. These are the synapses and interstices across which organisation must find a common framework of understanding of how to deal with the inevitable tensions that reside there as a consequence of the structural positions occupied by HFE providers in relation to other providers in the field.

An attempt is made here to analyse these interactions and patterns of organising within and across quadrants through examining the anomalies, paradoxes and contradictions experienced at the boundaries of the HFE interface. These tensions and contradictions are often as a consequence of the duality of funding, quality and organisational structures and processes that are typically found at the HFE interface. It is the boundaries of HFE where the anomalies, paradoxes and contradictions emanating from the sector are played out. Anomalies are those areas of HFE that transgress the orderly classification and categorisation of HFE practice.

Using the grid and group heuristic also helps contextualise boundary work at the HFE interface which is ingrained in a complex set of interdependent social relations, tensions and HFE organisational forms that are in turn embedded in the organisational field. To briefly recap an earlier point an organisational field can only exist to the extent that it is institutionalised as habituated or sedimented practice. At the boundaries as hybridisation takes place new organisational forms may emerge and become institutionalised or the patterns of organising may be transitory and unstable and in the long turn may not be sustainable.

Moreover, understanding the link between the perceptions of administrative and conventional structures and systems of classification that characterise HFE and its categorisation and the associated terminological legacies and social structures of the HFE organisational field is more complex than it appears on the surface because of the role of the tacit and informal organising within HFE. Often the success of collaboration is down to the efforts of one or two key personnel that may act as boundary spanners across the HFE divide and unless these roles and functions are effectively embedded as institutionalised practice the partnership may not be stable.

Thus dualisms and dichotomies are of limited use in achieving an understanding of these types of dynamics which require a relational, holistic, situated and contextual framework to explore their dynamics. Then there is the need for an analytical framework to capture the dynamics and tensions of organising at the HFE boundary and of incorporating an understanding of anomaly.

Here only a brief preliminary attempt has been made to explore and encapsulate the tensions, contradictions and dynamics that characterise these processes and contexts at the HFE interface through the adoption of a Douglas' model. Specifically, the function of ambiguity in systems of classifications as applied to understanding the anomalies, paradoxes, tensions and contradictions found at the boundaries of HFE and how to manage these tensions has only been briefly sketched. These undergo a constant process of organising and reorganising at the boundaries of HFE in a never ending cycle of mutually contradictory and at the same time mutually re enforcing patterns of interaction supported by different plural rationalities and organisational logics. It is this plurality and the duality of structures, cultures and processes that the grid group heuristic helps sketch.

In analysing the properties of the HFE boundary and interface as a relational construct an alternative approach that stresses the importance of boundary work and boundary objects for explaining the evolution of the HFE organisational field can be explored against typical forms of stable organisation. It is at the HFE interface that the relatively recent massification of HE has taken on a distinct form of delivery. And it is there that the 'natural social order' of HE (pre 1992) has been threatened by the anomaly that is HFE.

In Douglas' grid group model the boundaries are at the intersection of the quadrants in the grid group matrix and the classifications that support these quadrants as viable ways of organising. The constant drawing and redrawing of boundaries over time through that practices that are embedded and embodied in group interactions produces a taken for granted set of assumptions that have effectively become institutionalised as practice. Thus individualists meet at the boundaries with hierarchists; and victim and vanquished is not an option. Egalitarians meet with market entrepreneurs and fatalists are everywhere. Though they all argue from different premises they must ultimately accommodate a settlement and the weaknesses of each become balance by the strength of others. The alternative is possible policy failure and the subversion and resistance to initiatives.

Hierarchists try to systematise policy through the standardisation of rules and procedures that follow a rational planning model and have tendency towards formalisation and centralisation. Usually these will be top down forms of problem definition and preferred solutions. Egalitarians will tend to prefer consultative or democratic processes for formulating problems and suggesting solutions accordingly that are peer driven or based upon communities of practice or communities of interest. Individualists will see problems as an opportunity and will try to tap into markets as discovery processes to generate solutions and avoid centralised planning of the hierarchist. Fatalists as usual are on the periphery and problems and solutions are random events over which they perceive themselves as exercising limited control.

The individualist market-managerialist mode is a mix of individualism and hierarchy and is prominent in HFE and it is this mix of individualist and hierarchical modes of organising that are mediated through indirect structures of coordination and control through targets, performance indicators and centrally derived outputs. This is a corporate model that values order, codification and control structures at the core of the internal organising process while external organising favours a non interventionist neo-liberal market. FEC have been subject to more strong grid-strong group structures through their experience of delivering FE and operating to the inspection led regimes of OFSTED and ALI.

At its heart is a vertical principal agent model of control and goal alignment. In reality this is rarely the case in HFE where it is the quasi-market of centralised targets and centrally imposed fees that rule. Nevertheless the diagonal of control is from bottom left to top right. At the interface of HFE crossing boundaries between FE and HE is often confused by the different degrees to which high grid structures of managerialism exist in the collaborating organisations. The closer their organisational structures the less likely the misunderstandings. However, in the real world there is rarely a match and distinct clashes between quadrants are not uncommon.

Individualist-egalitarian settlements that cross organisational boundaries are more likely to work where highly specialised provision is being delivered. Peer review, communities of practice and inter organisational research networks nestle along this horizontal linkage. Goal alignment is usually through common value systems and systems of mutuality that allow differences across the quadrants to be tolerated.

Hierarchical-egalitarian settlements have strong social exclusion mechanisms and boundary maintenance mechanisms. They can lead to an archetypical dialogue of the deaf when hierarchical top down hard managerialism meets peer based collegiality: although collegiality is often presented as an antidote to the former. At best temporary alliances are likely.

Institutionalised cultural biases, selective and unintentional systemic deafness, and the different organisational cultures found in HFE collaboration may create dissonance and incongruence at the boundaries of HE and FE and influence partnerships to deviate from intended policy outcomes. Different voices and audiences across the boundaries produce a cacophony of institutional 'noises' at the interface of HFE.

Moreover formal organisational forms that cross the HFE interface do not necessarily reflect the organisational practices that are internal to their own organisations. A hierarchical organisational form can have dissenting sects within it. Individualists can form cartels. Fatalists can become activists and egalitarians can become individualists or hierarchists through faction and fission. All of these processes need to be understood in the context of the dynamics of the HFE organisational field situationally and empirically. The grid group heuristic merely offers a conceptual starting point towards the development of a theoretical body that analyses HFE analytically rather than descriptively and normatively according to the dictat of policy.

In conclusion the grid group heuristic implies there are only four stable generic or modal points identified in the grid group heuristic of patterns of cyclical organisation and re-organisation. Over time the pendulum switches from one to another although in time the cycle repeats. Each of the four modal points to some extent compliments amplifies or cancels out the other. The point is that all four coexist at any one time. They are like wavelengths in a cycle of repeating frequencies, a repeating pattern that demonstrates symmetry and oscillations around a mean or model focal point of organisation. Each component of the wave complements or reinforces the others. Alternatively waves on different frequencies can cancel out or modify the others.

Thus the claim is that there are only four stable patterns of organisation: individualist, hierarchist egalitarian or fatalist. According to the requisite variety condition each of the four generic stable modes complements the weaknesses of the others. If they are all not present to some degree the weakness of one will lead to instability and excesses in the others, although one mode will tend to dominate. In effect perverse incentives may be generated and dysfunctions arise in policy implementation. In HFE collaborations, variations in inter-organisational transactions and exchanges across the four quadrants increase the possible number of permutations from four to sixteen. In multiple partnerships this will become even more complex and more combinations and configurations of possible elements exist.

The grid group typology, therefore aids the conceptual identification of and systematisation of potential combinations of ways of organising across inter organisational boundaries. The basic claim is that logic and rationalities that capture group and organisational preferences and incentives embedded in organisational fields (grid) must reflect in some way the social relations of that field through which they are sustained (group). The resulting matrix has identified four common generic stable and modal forms of organising that are commonly found across comparative contexts. It remains to identify the mechanisms whereby transactions and exchanges across the HFE interface are mediated and become institutionalised as sustainable embedded practice. The boundaries of these intersections or interfaces

are constantly shifting but oscillate around the four modal forms of organising as a locus of relative stability and potential source of institutionalisation.

It is at the intersection of the quadrants that misunderstanding and translation problems are likely to occur at it is at these points that the concept of boundary objects can in part facilitate translation.

Boundary Objects

Understanding the dynamics, tensions and processes of organising at the HFE interface has potential for policy and practice through understanding what contributes to successful HFE partnerships. In moving away from static concepts of dualistic and dichotomised analysis, a holistic, relational, situational and historical context has been sketched through the use of grid group heuristic that helps frame the positioning strategies of organisations within the HFE organisational field. It remains here to illustrate the mechanisms whereby boundary crossing may take place at the HFE interface.

The idea of a boundary object as a mediator of practice is a term coined by Star and Griesemer (1989) but also has roots in actor network theory (Callon, 1986, Latour, 1987). A boundary object occupies an interstitial zone of translation between divergent interests groups that meet in some form of inter organisational collaborative enterprise through which they share, at least in part, a common purpose. Boundary objects are:

“objects which both inhabit several intersecting social worlds and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them. Boundary objects are objects which as plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual use. These objects may be abstract or concrete. They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation. The creation and management of boundary objects is a key process in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds.” (Star and Griesmer, 1989, p 393)

Boundary objects link ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991) or provide linking mechanisms that broker the construction of shared meanings across boundaries between legally autonomous and independent organisations each which has its own distinct separate identity. As its name implies a boundary object can be an object or an artefact; but it can equally be a process, a role, an event, an encounter or a document.

They connect practices across different organisations engaged in a structured collaborative configuration that will also link the domain of one, in this case HE with that of the other, in this instance FE. They are mechanisms that function as a co-ordinating link. They mediate shared emergent common meanings among partners who are initially unfamiliar with each others working practices. They occupy a liminal space betwixt and between HE and FE.

While the concept of boundary implies separation, distinction and exclusion and inclusion, the idea of a boundary object helps facilitate communication and exchange between organisations. It alerts the analysis to the common frameworks of meaning that, although nevertheless partial and often marginal to the core activities of both organisations, are necessarily shared. In HFE there is rarely a balance of power between FE and HE because for many HFE’s HE is a marginal activity. Even in the mixed economy group where HE is a significant proportion of an HFE providers activity there are asymmetrical relations between organisations in terms of resources and their ability to define which ‘rules of the game’, HE or FE, will apply in HFE.

However, boundary objects act as mechanism for transacting, coordinating and aligning preferences, dispositions and interests between the two distinct world views of different collaborating groups and organisations with separate legal, symbolic and operational identities. Boundary objects are multi functional serving multiple constituencies. They consist of multiple principal agent relations, dual authority structures and sometimes contested plural rationalities. They can also help manage local uncertainties and risk in partnerships mitigating against opportunism and help solidify the legitimacy and trust involved for effective inter organisational collaboration.

Boundary objects in HFE can include: codes of practice (HEFCE, 1999a, 1999b, 2000a, 2000b, QAA, 1999) directives from funding and quality agencies, government white papers (DfES, 2003), subject benchmark statements, minutes of joint meetings between partners, contracts and other textual and procedural artefacts. They can also be joint staff development events or validation events. They are essentially focal points around which common meaning frameworks are socially constructed and coalesce.

Thus boundary objects mediate collaborative processes through providing a mechanism for aligning a common framework of organisational dispositions between collaborating organisations that allow actors from the different organisations to orient themselves to a common *modus operandi*. At the same time the collaborating groups or organisations retain their distinct identities. Thus boundary objects are a means whereby relations between diverse groups are mediated and negotiated through shared use. They link two principals in a joint principal agent relation that spans their individual organisations.

Boundary objects can also constitute elements of the organisational memory in cases in which collaborations have been long standing and trust and reputation has become embedded in practice and act as a glue to cement successful partnerships.

As there are clear differences in working practices, cultures and traditions in FE and HE and these not infrequently cause tensions at the HFE interface. The consequence is that the dispositions and preferences of different groups in the two domains are often distinct and constructing common ground and meaning systems is partial and not always at the core of the two partners own practices. Managing these tensions paradoxes and anomalies at the HFE interface and embedding their resolution in stable forms of organising in a highly fluid and uncertain environment is the secret of successful collaboration.

Carlile (2002) offers a useful analysis of the properties of boundaries and the role of boundary objects and boundary crossing practices in inter organisational collaborations. He refers to the differences between collaborating organisations; the degree of dependency between partners, and a feature he terms novelty as an outcome of inter organisational links.

The extent of **difference** between collaborating organisations and the similarities and differences of cultures, traditions, processes and practices between them is a key factor in establishing the potential permeability of boundaries and the success of boundary crossing practices.

The extent to which the collaborating groups are **dependent** on each other is another factor. High levels of interdependence that mean assets cannot easily be deployed elsewhere increase dependency as does the lack of alternative partners to collaborate with.

The third factor is the extent to which collaboration incorporates **novelty** into inter organisational partnerships or constitutes potential for generating synergies and new ways of working and dealing with uncertainty and spreading risk.

He also refers to boundary properties (Carlile, 2002) in terms of what he refers to as the **syntactic**, or sharing of a common language or system of classification; the **semantic** as the cognitive dimension of collective meaning between collaborating organisation; and the **pragmatic** or the realm of strategy and positioning of organisations within an organisational field. Applying these insights to HFE the following are suggestive of the potential of these analytical constructs for understanding boundary work and boundary properties at the HFE interface.

HFE collaborating organisations are in the process of developing a common language and system of classification but have inherited a path dependent legacy that can sometimes cloud the issue. The syntactic dimension of boundary properties is thus in flux but the trend is towards a degree of standardisation. The semantic dimension goes to the heart of the contested nature of HFE and its meaning and the struggle over the claims to legitimacy that these entail. It is here that HEI's and FEC's delivering HFE most often argue from different premises. And it is here that HFE is most acutely perceived as contested terrain. The final pragmatic dimension of HFE boundary properties is the realm of organisational strategy and positioning within the HFE organisational field. It is here that structure

and action interface and structures of constraint and choice interact in a dialectic of organising at the interface of HFE.

Thus in HFE the new universities are less different than traditional universities in terms of their distinct traditions and practices when compared to HFE providers because of their past common role as part of the public sector of LEA controlled post compulsory provision and their links with external awarding bodies such as the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). They are familiar with complying with external awarding bodies that are part of a locally mediated national framework. Thus FEC's delivering HFE and the old polytechnic sector have never had the same level of autonomy from external influences as the traditional universities.

The number of partners and whether funding is direct or indirect will also effect the level of dependency between partners; while dependency will also tend to be asymmetrical in terms of where the power lies in HFE. In terms of novelty, controlling uncertainty and opportunism between collaborating organisations will usually be linked to the length and track record of a partnership and the building of trust. Widening participation and access to HE through collaboration, though, generates synergies by facilitating access to non traditional students who otherwise might not enter HE.

Boundary properties and the degree of similarity and difference, organisational forms, cultures and traditions between collaborating HEI's and FEC's delivering HFE in part determine the permeability of the HFE interface and the structure of transactions and exchanges across the boundary. Boundary objects mediate the interface and boundary organisations facilitate exchanges and transactions across the HFE interface.

Boundary organisations

Boundary organisations mediate inter-organisational collaboration through the interpretation of and translation of the 'rules of the game' that link and regulate HFE in the organisational field. The HEFCE and the QAA are boundary organisations. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) is also a boundary organisation providing support and information on good practice for HFE provision. These are sometimes called quango's but a boundary organisation does not have to be a quango.

These organisations may be weakly or strongly embedded in the institutional landscape and organisational fabric either functioning at the margins of a field if weakly embedded in practice or at the centre if strongly embedded. In strong grid and strong group contexts they will be strongly embedded and in weak grid and weak groups situations weakly embedded. Various permutations and configurations of grid and group help conceptualise the shifting patterns of organising at the boundaries of HFE and help establish the degree to which boundary crossing practices become institutionalised as a component of the HFE organisational field. Funding and quality agencies tend to be strongly embedded in practice and influence not least as a mechanism of coercive isomorphism. The implications for non compliance can be severe.

The concept of embeddedness is drawn from Granovetter (1985) and is a term commonly used in economic sociology. It refers to the extent that economic action has become structurally embedded in social relations. Indeed, economic sociologists argue that all economic action is socially embedded. Weakly embedded ties can be useful in some situations because they link hitherto disconnected organisations and groups in common endeavours. In this sense boundary organisations can broker linkages between organisations. But too strongly embedded contexts can lead to situations where the salience of the ties that bind members to groups are excessive and re-enforce boundary maintenance mechanisms that mitigate against boundary crossings and in that sense restrict organisational innovation.

Another author who has considered the linkages between individuals and groups in terms of their potential for innovation and entrepreneurship is Burt (1985) who developed the concept of structural holes. A structural hole is a non redundant tie between two individuals, groups or organisations that link hitherto disconnected area of practice. This is the essence of the idea of how boundaries are social constructs that insulate one set of practices from another and of boundary crossing practices as a means of institutionalising policy goals such as widening access and participation in HE through HFE structured collaborative partnerships. Boundary organisations can function to facilitate the spanning of organisational boundaries and the exploitation of structural holes.

Linking structural holes can generate synergies; for example when the private sector and public sector are brought together to implement partnerships towards a common goal. Failure to make these links leads to policy failure because the boundaries of collaborating organisations effectively remain in place at tacit, informal or symbolic levels. In HFE this state of affairs might be usefully termed performativity at the boundaries. There is some evidence of partnerships in HFE that do not work because boundary crossing activities do not become sufficiently institutionalised at the boundaries.

Therefore boundary organisations mediate the discontinuities in practice between these prevailing institutional logics, ways of organising and ‘cultural biases’ that are found in the different traditions and historical legacies (terminological and operational) found in HE and FE prior to the shift to ‘high policy’.

Boundary organisations are thus embedded in organisational fields that are the consequence of a successful process of institutionalisation through which preferred forms of organising become embedded and embodied in an HFE organisations practice. Within fields, boundary organisations and boundary objects mediate the discontinuities in practice between the incumbents of the field.

And boundaries are also liminal zones, the sites of a constant process of organising and reconfiguration in never ending incremental cycles of change and stabilisation. The idea of liminality is borrowed from Turner (1974) and implies a dynamic process of transition from one structural state to another. Unlike dualism or dichotomies which tend towards the static the liminal nature of boundaries as a state of becoming and organising focuses analysis on these processual mechanisms. The liminal represents an intermediate stage and an ambiguous ‘middle’ between two social structurally stable states. Such boundary work is the stuff of everyday practice in HFE, a volatile and constant process of configuration and reconfiguration at the HFE interface.

Structured collaborative HFE partnerships will be at different stages of development and maturation at any one point in time. What will be common to a successful one is that boundary organisations can facilitate the linking of structural holes and boundary objects that become embedded in practice. Boundaries are set in contexts and at the intersections of practice. The grid group heuristic helps conceptualise this context while the processes of embedding alerts the analysis to the mechanisms whereby boundary crossing practices become institutionalised as shared ‘rules of the game’.

Boundary work

In an early development of the concept Gieryn (1983, p.782), in the context of studies of science, defines boundary-work as:

‘... the attribution of certain characteristics to the institution of science (for example: to its practitioners, methods, store of knowledge, values and organisation of labour) for the purpose of constructing a social boundary that differentiates some intellectual activities as being “non-science”.

Gieryn’s (1983) initial conceptualisation of boundary work can be applied to the demarcation of the boundaries of organisational fields, boundary organisations and boundary objects found in the structured partnerships of HFE. If one replaces science with HE and non science with FE (comprising two distinct worlds) in Gieryn’s quote to organising at the HFE interface then boundary crossing activities and boundary work at least in part refer to the re-enforcing of boundaries. Again these are not dichotomies but polarities of interaction at the HFE interface of inter-organisational collaboration. They need to be understood relationally, in context and holistically.

To the extent that boundary work creates divisions between FE and HE and boundary maintenance mechanisms apply, there are likely to be tensions that impede the crossing of potentially permeable HFE boundaries. These may often be subtle, tacit and informal and rooted in different past practices and cultural traditions. Equally boundary crossing in time may well become institutionalised and embedded in a mature HFE organisational field.

But boundary work is also simultaneously a process of demarcation and circularity or of the deconstruction of existing boundaries and reconstitution and reconfiguration of old boundaries and reconfiguration or institutionalisation of the new at the interstices. This is a constant, cyclical and

dynamic processes. Grid and group capture this context of constant organising and reconfiguration through its stress on the four stable ways of organising, hierarchy, individualism, egalitarianism and fatalism as modal forms of organisation..

The boundaries between FE and HE have blurred with a number of significant general frame shifts especially through incorporation and later the Dearing Report in 1997. Shifting frames usher in new institutional logics and logics of action based upon different premises and policy goals. The push towards more structured forms of collaborative provision is one of the most significant of these.

Yet there is no one way of organising there is only a dynamic state of constrained relativism in which the four modal forms constantly re-invent themselves. There is a constant process of organising, reorganising and reconfiguration at the boundaries and interface between the four quadrants within the grid group matrix. Organising at the interfaces of HFE is thus a state of tension and positioning within the context of an emergent organisational field. These processes cannot be understood outside of their context and its associated roles functions and processes or of their inherently contested nature.

As an organisational field only exists to the extent that it is institutionalised the question of how new practices become institutionalised in organisational fields is pertinent? Why do some policy initiatives lead to policy failure and others do not? Institutionalised practices are ones that work and have become habitual, embodied as conventions and routine and in formal and informal practice.

The demarcation of an organisational field is an iterative and a dialectical process and boundary objects and boundary organisations contribute to its structuration. Overall the maturation of a field goes through a number of iterations as identified by DiMaggio and Powell (1983, 1991). Firstly, the construction of a common meaning system and the formation of coalitions and alliances characterise a maturing field and these processes are in part enabled through boundary objects and boundary organisations. Secondly, there is increasing frequency of interaction between incumbents of an emergent organisational field and an increase in the information load circulating in the field. These processes can be empirically examined through the web sites of various boundary organisations such as the Higher Education Academy and Foundation Degree Forward or through those of the HEFCE and QAAHE which increasingly have focussed on an advisory role for HFE delivered through structured collaborative arrangements. Such an over view reveals that the HFE organisation field has acquired a distinct identity and prominence especially since the Dearing Report that it has never had before. Indeed, DiMaggio and Powell's claims that organisational fields will tend towards common patterns of interaction and organising or isomorphism, is certainly substantiated in the case of the HFE organisational field post Dearing (NCIHE, 1997).

Institutional pressures typical of types of coercive isomorphism consist of the regulatory pressures that can sanction and punish digressions if audit, quality and funding requirements are not met in HFE. Normative isomorphism refers to those pressures that originate in the organising capabilities of professional organisations and interests across the HFE interface. These may be linked to the concept of communities of practice or they may include professional associations, trade unions, centres of excellence and examples of perceived legitimate best practice. Mimetic isomorphism refers to the mimicking of perceived successful organisations in the HFE organisational field as a response to uncertainty and a lack of prior expertise that results in copying the behaviour of others as legitimate models of organising. These may result in preferred models of organising HFE based upon integrated binary systems or of dual systems that separate HE and FE by place, function or mission.

In the HFE organisational field boundary objects act as conduits to align the interest of collaborating organisations and to mediate the countervailing pressures of isomorphism and the generation of homogeneity in organisational forms and the divergence and differentiation of organisational forms within HFE according to criteria of difference and separateness. Boundary objects function in liminal and interstitial spaces, the transitional points in social structural 'space' at which practice either will become institutionalised and embedded as legitimate practice, routine or convention, or it will fail to take root. In the later case the result is policy or market failure.

Consequently, HFE is also a stratified and diverse field. Internally the field of HFE retains the characteristic of a positional good (Marginson, 1997) and organisations within it define themselves and orientate their strategic behaviours towards that of other members of the field. The massification and

marketisation of HE, of which HFE is an integral and increasingly important part in England, is leading to a divergence of organisational forms as well as a convergence as predicted by DiMaggio and Powell.

Dual systems of HE and FE and hybrid organisational forms of HFE coexist in a mix of countervailing pressures, tensions, contradictions and synergies. Boundary objects and boundary organisations occupy the interstitial spaces at which these influences are played out, facilitating synergy between collaborating organisations within a field through the construction of common frames of meaning, while at the same time organisations in the field maintain their distinct identities and spheres of autonomy in the midst of increasing diversity.

There are inevitably explicit and implicit tensions and ambiguities as a consequence of this duality; and boundary objects and boundary organisations mediate these contradictions and reflect the tensions and ambiguity of HFE and its liminality. Yet in this betwixt and between world of transitions and translations boundary objects are a locus of coordination and institutionalisation and a site of constant and often recycled patterns of organising.

These tensions are located in the problem of dual agency, plural authority forms and in the existence of multiple principal agent relations in structured collaborative arrangements in HFE and in the contested arena of the HFE organisational field. The grid and group heuristic has been used above to identify the coexistence of different forms of organising and their associated rationalities or 'cultural biases' expressed as organisational dispositions, preferences and interests, and based upon four modal stable forms of organising with various permutations, mixes and combinations of these. In this model it is unsurprising that there are tensions. Indeed, conflict is normal. Different modal forms of organising always exist at the boundaries of HFE. This is not a static state of affairs. That is why the use of dichotomies for understanding the dynamics of organising at the interface is of limited use.

Utilising the concepts of boundary work and boundary objects and contextualising them through the use of the grid group heuristic facilitates the analysis of a constant process of formal and informal organising in the HFE organisational field. At the boundaries of HFE there is a dynamic and turbulent process at work. Rather than conceptualising this in terms of a stable and reified boundary that is defined dualistically or as a dichotomy and objectified as a set of formal classifications and categories, the anomalies, paradoxes and contradictions that take place when 'matter is out of place' as in Douglas' analysis of anomaly in classification systems, needs to be taken into account. In some circumstances HFE is perceived as 'matter out of place' and to understand this the interests and position of other organisations in the HFE organisational field, who may feel threatened, need to be taken into account.

Boundary work within the HFE organisational field addresses the issue of the organisation of HFE provision as a struggle over control of resources and in particular the struggle for the legitimacy of HFE. In effect it addresses the question of what HFE actually is and in what way is it different or the same as other forms of HE, how it relates to or is positioned in relation to other forms of HE, and in terms of power differentials and asymmetries in collaborative arrangements. At the same time the positioning and repositioning strategies of organisations within the HFE field coexist with common frameworks of meaning that constitute the coalitions and alliance that gradually emerge within the field. Common meanings coalesce around boundary objects in the HFE field and in particular through their role in coordinating and translating inter organisational collaborations, alliances and coalitions within those fields.

Contextualisation and de-contextualisation at the boundaries of HFE are constant features of the construction of an organisational field and of boundary objects as mechanisms for the constant reiterative process of organising, configuration and reconfiguration at the boundary. That is why dichotomies are of limited use. Boundaries are not stable but are constantly shifting, forming and reforming. That is not to say that there is an infinite numbers of ways of organising as the processes of institutionalisation result in the sedimentation of practice as embedded organisational forms. As mentioned earlier the grid group dimension identifies four stable and recurrent forms of modal organising around which the process of organisation tends to oscillate: hierarchy, individualism, egalitarianism and fatalism. While they all coexist at any one time, only one is dominant.

The tensions and paradoxes that exist between multiple actors and multiple principal-agent relations are complex cutting across what were once two historically distinct sectors of HE and FE. The

terminological legacies of the past and the administrative categorisation of the present can illuminate the structures of HFE when examined holistically as a system of classification. However, it is the anomalies at the boundaries of HFE and within the system of classifying HFE that has been examined here. These reflect the duality of agency and the plural rationalities that are embedded in modal patterns of organising at the HFE interface. Dualisms and dichotomies are unable to capture the relational dimensions and contexts that frame these processes.

These tensions will always exist in an organisational field and different preferences for different patterns of organising HFE will coexist and will characterise the very duality and hybridity of HFE. The grid group heuristic has been used to explore that duality and the processes of hybridisation found in HFE, the genesis of tensions at its boundaries and the role of boundary work, boundary objects and boundary organisations in managing them. This mapping of the contours of the institutional and organisational landscape of HFE outlines the different premises from which HE and FE perceive HFE and their different discourses. At the end of the day it may well be that in HFE there are those who are 'arguing from different premises' and will never agree. The lesson for HFE policy implementation is that this is an inevitable consequence of the cyclical phases of organising that is a feature of tertiary education and the plural rationalities and contexts of legitimation that coexist there?

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