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An Exploration of Leadership and Sustainable Development within UK Further Education Colleges

Abstract

The aim of this research is to determine the perception and understanding of Sustainable Development (SD) by a group of leaders from the UK vocational education sector (known as Further Education).

The purpose of the research is to cross-examine the perception of SD by FE leadership with the strategies of the sector's funding and regulatory bodies to determine the extent to which the sector has engaged with the SD agenda, its motives for doing so, and how this engagement is defined.

This paper will firstly present a literature review highlighting the prevalent lack of dedicated academic research on this sector compared with its neighbouring tiers of higher education and schools. It will propose that this reflects an assumption that the outputs of research carried out on SD within HE and Schools are transferable to FE, despite its own considerable presence within UK education.

The paper will then provide a synopsis on the significant portfolio of case study 'sustainability' research produced by the sector, highlighting a prevailing environmental sustainability paradigm but lacking coherence and an articulation with the dominant themes of governance level strategies.

Replicating Wright's 2010 and 2012 studies on the conceptualisation of SD by HE sector leaders (2010) and facilities managers (2012), the paper will outline the methods by which a similar gap in research in FE will be pursued, examining the level of sustainability knowledge amongst the FE leaders rather than scholars or sustainability professionals within the sector. The research is seeking to identify how its' leaders interpret its relevance at a strategic level both from the perspective of a group of leaders who perform an advisory and leading role to their own sector, and from the perspective of the sector members on their perception of the effectiveness of leadership. The goals of this research are therefore threefold: 1) Is FE addressing Sustainable Development? 2) What is the relationship between the understanding and awareness of SD by FE leadership? And 3) what is the nature of disconnect between awareness and practice of SD within colleges?

The paper will provide detail and justify the adaptation of Wright's 2010 and 2012 framework used in HE, to an examination of the FE sector leaders' conceptualisation of SD. Using Grounded theory (GT), a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods will be used to generate respondent themes which will be subsequently used to advance theory within the transition management framework (TMF). Stephens (2010) identifies that the prescriptive and descriptive capacities of the TMF could inform a fundamental level of empirical research within higher education, a societal sub- system within which the TMF has not yet been explored. The TMF rather than a sustainability reporting framework such as the Global Reporting Index (GRI) will be used to advance theory of leadership within FE. Sustainability frameworks such as the GRI are used to report on organisations' environmental and social indicators, and are often based on data gathered through other frameworks such as the ISO14001 (Marimon et al, 2012). This study is not to report on performance

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against individual facets of sustainable development, but to identify the prevailing approach within a sector which typically does not report on sustainability indicators.

The sustainability transition will be based on the TMF, which identifies three descriptive levels of interaction each of which representing a characteristic of 'activity' - strategic, tactical, operational and reflexive. The TMF also provides a prescriptive framework, providing direction toward policy shaping processes, implementation and evaluation (Stephens, 2010). Both functions will be used for this study to classify at which stage of the sustainability transition the FE leadership approach is currently embedded.

Word count: 598

References

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